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SONIC INTOLERANCE:  
AURAL YELLOWFACE DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN RADIO

By

Greyson Perry Neff  
B.A., Rhodes College, 2014

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in History

Department of History  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017

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A Thesis Approved on

April 13, 2017

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## ABSTRACT

### SONIC INTOLERANCE:

#### AURAL YELLOWFACE DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN RADIO

Greyson P. Neff

April 13, 2017

The position of the Asian in the American popular imagination has a long history, stretching back to nineteenth century vaudeville theatrical performances and remaining largely unchanged throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Portrayed as simultaneously cunning and ignorant, spiritual and corrupt, or submissive and sexualized, Oriental stereotypes have remained firmly entrenched in popular culture. While perceptions of race exist largely in a visual sense, a closer look at how people *heard* racial differences opens up new avenues for scholarly interpretation of the social construction of race and the shifting notions of citizenship. This thesis will investigate how listeners during the Golden Age of American radio understood race and racial differences, as yellowface on the radio allowed performers to embody conceptions of Asian otherness, producing sonic caricatures that reinforced notions of inferiority while concurrently securing a white national identity. This thesis adds to the growing number of cultural histories of Asian Americans and offers readers a comprehensive look into the presence of yellowface on the radio during the first half of the twentieth century.

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## INTRODUCTION

The unique role of radio in establishing and maintaining a singular national identity for Americans across the United States cannot be overstated. The unprecedented capacity for radio to reach large masses of people, across the country and across socioeconomic and racial lines, allowed it to disseminate monolithic national (white) American identity. Capitalizing on the distinctive qualities of radio, programmers utilized this new technology to ensure that one singular voice could reach the entire nation simultaneously. That voice frequently belonged to a white American male. Golden Age radio reflected, reproduced, and reinforced white America's desire for cultural hegemony. In this quest for dominance, other ethnicities and races were deemed unfit to be true Americans and were thus portrayed as inferior to the American national identity. Because nationality is a "constantly shifting and contested terrain that organizes the ideological struggle over hierarchies and inequalities," popular culture, in this instance radio, becomes a "significant arena in which the struggle over defining American nationality occurs" and becomes crucial to how we define race.<sup>1</sup> It is the complicated relationship between radio, popular culture, and East Asian immigrants and citizens that will be the focus of this argument, highlighting the pervasive power of sonic intolerance and the importance of radio in the formation and mobilization of national identities, often

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<sup>1</sup> Robert G Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 6.



rooted in white nativist discourse. Radio, as a place where notions of race, citizenship, nationhood, and gender converged, crystalized anti-Asian sentiment. Anxieties regarding other races could be mitigated through the radio, which had become an arena in which the battle for who could be considered a true American was fought. Through the radio, listeners could identify what an American citizen *sounded* like, creating a sonic notion of citizenship that was equally, if not more, important than what one looks like.

The power of the audial voice in the development of racial (and racist) ideologies in relation to East Asians is surprisingly underexplored but fundamentally important to our understanding of the formation of racial and national identity. Yellowface, a term that invokes and expands the tradition of blackface, is the way in which actors, producers, musicians, and comedians portrayed East Asians, expressing itself in degrading representations of Asians and Asian Americans in American popular culture.<sup>2</sup> This yellowface tradition began in the mid-nineteenth century but was adopted by Golden Age radio programmers, who found that they could readily communicate with listeners and perpetuate, reflect, and reinforce these entrenched racist ideologies. This, in turn, worked

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the sonic examples utilized in this thesis focus on the Japanese and Chinese, a decision largely dependent on current foreign policy relations at any given moment. I have found though that yellowface stereotypes frequently applied to all Asians in America, regardless of ethnicity. This kind of stereotyping is significant and will be discussed in my thesis. Therefore, I will utilize Asian and Asian American throughout my work more generally, and the term Oriental when discussing yellowface stereotype. Asian Americans' contended with the overarching depictions of all Asians as belonging to a singular Oriental group in the 1960s. For a deeper understanding of why I elect to use the term Asian and Asian American as a category for analysis, see: Sucheng Chan, "The Changing Contours of Asian-American Historiography" *Rethinking History* (Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2007), pp. 126-127 where she notes that the term was adopted as a "form of resistance – a militant demand for inclusion in the American body politic," acknowledging a "common historical experience of being treated as racial/ethnic minorities *within the United States*, rather than the fact that [their] ancestors came from the same continent." The broad term Asian American can "project a vision of Asian American panethnic solidarity" and is "preferred over such national-origin terms as Chinese, Filipina/o, Japanese or Korean because it encompasses a larger grouping with potentially greater political clout in the struggles for racial equality and social justice."

to redefine white, national identity by both expanding to include new groups, like the Irish or Jews, while simultaneously reinforcing the exclusion of other groups, including blacks and Asians. There is a significant gap in historical literature regarding sonic yellowface, where research moves from theatrical representations of East Asians in the nineteenth century to the development of television in the mid-twentieth century, offering very little commentary on Asians and Asian Americans on radio.<sup>3</sup> This thesis seeks to demonstrate how racial ideology regarding Asians and Asian Americans can be configured, construed, and constructed sonically via early American radio. Radio's aural representations of race was inextricably linked to the construction of a white national identity in America during the first half of the twentieth century. Radio programmers and listeners worked in tandem to use racialized aural codes to define notions of citizenship and whiteness in an effort to maintain a dominant cultural identity.<sup>4</sup>

By extending Nina Eidsheim's assertions of an "acousmatic blackness," or the "perceived presence of the black body in a voice," to include an Asian and Asian American voice, we can better understand how listening is a "socially and culturally

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<sup>3</sup> The few scholars who have engaged with Asian American representation on the radio will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter and throughout this thesis. See Russo, "A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*"; Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy*; and Crum, "'Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East' Techno-Orientalism in Early Twentieth Century U.S. Radio Broadcasting."

<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation and hailing is useful here, where we can better understand how listeners may have internalized notions of class, gender, ethnicity, and race as a function of an accepted kind of ideology. Therefore, the hegemonic voice/ideology could be mobilized by the radio, contributing to the continued dominance of ideology that works to ensure the continued subjugation of listeners. Radio programs, and other mass media, capitalized on a shared and widely accepted understanding of the Oriental, working to hail listeners via yellowface. For more information, see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1989), pp. 170-186. It should be noted that the concept of interpellation has been widely critiqued for leaving out critical notions of listener agency, emphasizing how recipients of "hailing" could have interpreted that process.

bound undertaking” rather than simply “immanent and neutral.”<sup>5</sup> So long as American listeners believed in racial differences, radio programs continued to “enact” and reinforce “those differences in sound.”<sup>6</sup> American listeners heard race and racial differences where no difference actually existed, actively participating in this social construction of race. The various ways in which Americans heard (and continue to hear) Oriental voices in mainstream media links explicitly to the deeply ingrained conceptions of an Oriental body, essentialized and oversimplified.<sup>7</sup> Radio programmers and actors used East Asians to “address other issues in the United States” like “gender relations, working-class identity, [and] the effects of modernity.”<sup>8</sup> The unique properties of radio allow us to better understand how listeners actively participated in the construction of yellowface stereotypes.

Consumers of radio were integral players in the aural construction of race, making meaning out of the various performances to which they listened. My thesis will utilize overlapping genres of radio programs during the Golden Age of Radio, the roughly thirty-year dominance of radio from the 1920s to the 1950s, including selected comedy programs, crime-fighting melodramas, adventure serials, and superhero programs.<sup>9</sup> A

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<sup>5</sup> Nina S Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 63, No. 3 (September 2011), 647.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Michael Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xiii, quoted in Nina S Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 63, No. 3 (September 2011), 664.

<sup>7</sup> An extension of Eidsheim’s notion that “the ways in which Americans hear black voices are tethered to century-old beliefs about black bodies” in “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” 665.

<sup>8</sup> Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>9</sup> I have elected to use the term Golden Age throughout my work, largely for temporal purposes. Golden Age radio refers to a time when network radio (NBC, CBS, Mutual Broadcasting, and later ABC) dominated the airwaves, limiting space for more localized programming and depending on corporate sponsors, who dictated much of what consumers heard. My decision to utilize Golden Age is significant and reflects my dependency on the available repository of radio

deeper analysis of specific characters, plot-lines, and episodes will highlight how radio functioned to “relieve, repress, or otherwise manage cultural anxieties”<sup>10</sup> through its perpetuation of aural yellowface and the subsequent redefining a white American identity by and for listeners. Radio, as a technological innovation, functioned as a vehicle for the dissemination of yellowface, facilitating a kind of conversation between listeners and radio programmers. Anxieties regarding things like gender norms, traditional family values, miscegenation, financial crises, impending war, or rising consumerism could be assuaged via the radio. Radio programmers produced content that allowed for the creation of a white national identity by depicting Asians and Asian Americans (and other ‘nonwhite’ minorities) as inferior. Radio reflected cultural norms by reproducing entrenched stereotypes sonically, resonating with listeners across the United States.

Asian racial differences, characterized in this instance sonically, were appropriated, highlighted, and essentialized via US radio in the twentieth century, where the experiences of Asian and Asian Americans were portrayed and performed by white actors, writers, producers, and comedians. Yellowface stereotypes were not an “individual’s perception of another individual or even of a group,” rather a “group perception of a group which grows from collective instead of private outlook and experience and become embedded in popular culture.”<sup>11</sup> Scholar Robert G. Lee notes that

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programs within network archives. Recent scholars have pushed back on the term Golden Age and the attention on national networked radio, including Alexander Russo in his book, *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). But, for the purposes of this thesis, I find it useful to use the term Golden Age.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Russo, “A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 260.

<sup>11</sup> Dale T. Knobel, “A Vocabulary of Ethnic Perception: Content Analysis of the American Stage Irishman: 1820-1860,” (*Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, April 1981), 48.

because race is a “mode of placing cultural meaning on the body,” yellowface “marks the Oriental as indelibly alien.”<sup>12</sup> It is the very fact that the Oriental was “constructed as a race of aliens” that they represented a “present danger of pollution,” an important racial (and often political) category for understanding the uniquely precarious position of Asians in America.<sup>13</sup> As noted above, I will be utilizing the term Oriental throughout this work to note the archetypal, stereotypical nature of this yellowface image. The Oriental, as a “racial category” is “never isolated from struggles over race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and national identity,” therefore it is representative of white America’s impulses towards essentialism.<sup>14</sup>

Asians in America, in particular Chinese and Japanese immigrants and citizens, were targeted with harsh immigration laws, exclusionary practices, and legal restrictions inspired by Yellow Peril fears, which ultimately culminated the internment of Japanese Americans and legal citizens during World War II. The period of study within this thesis, from 1882 to 1951, highlights the degree in which Asians in America were racially excluded on a national scale. By honing in on universal themes, popular radio programs reflected the dominant discourse regarding East Asians and Orientality, often reinforcing beliefs in certain racial characteristics and solidifying Asians and Asian Americans as inherently inferior to white Americans. Radio listeners used programming, which mobilized racial imagery and stereotyping, to manage their own fears about society by creating an easily identifiable other. Active listening was essential to the construction of

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<sup>12</sup> Lee, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

imagined communities.<sup>15</sup> Radio allowed listeners to redefine a white, national identity while also working to construct a racial identity for Asians in America.

Systematic marginalization of minorities via mass media, the most obvious and prevalent example being African Americans, was not new. In fact, Golden Age radio programming played upon ingrained traditions of vaudeville and minstrel shows, reinvigorating their popularity with the American public and offering a new vehicle for the widespread dissemination of racism. Instances of yellowface on the radio, which mirrors blackface in many ways,<sup>16</sup> represents a resurgence of stereotypical depictions of the Oriental (most frequently Chinese and Japanese). Victorian-era vaudeville theatrical performances of minorities gave way to phonographic recordings of comedy skits and musical yellowface at the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup> These recordings, while rife with stereotypical representations of Asians and Asian Americans, were certainly not as widespread as radio. As the technological innovation of radio became more popular, it worked as a new forum for the circulation of racialized ideologies and societal conceptions of minority Americans. Radio, unlike other mediums for circulation before it, was a source for information that reached places in the United States where mass communication (and entertainment) was scarce, where actual Asian or Asian American

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>16</sup> For a helpful discussion of the history of blackface in American popular culture, see John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006). Strausbaugh succinctly defines blackface as “a form of racist caricature invented by White Americans in the minstrel-show days of the 1800s,” which played an “integral role in the formation of American popular culture” (24). For a discussion of blackface on American radio specifically, see William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Krystyn R. Moon’s *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005) provides a detailed overview of yellowface in theatre and music until the 1920s.

presence may have been very limited. As minstrel shows and vaudeville theatrical performances were reinvigorated by the airwaves, conveyed sonically but nonetheless rooted in a visceral image of the Oriental body.<sup>18</sup>

As networks consolidated radio frequencies in the 1930s, space for actual minority voices on the airwaves became increasingly limited. Of course, popular radio programs like *Amos 'n' Andy* adopted Jim Crow stereotypes aurally and for comedic effect. White actors became Amos, Andy, and the cast of varied characters that represented a swath of blackface stereotypes popular in minstrel shows like the sly Zip Coon, the foolish Jim Crow, or the scandalous Jezebel.<sup>19</sup> This reinvigoration of blackface on the radio reflects a similar reinvigoration of minstrel stereotyping for Asian and Asian Americans. Like blackness, sonic yellowness, or the sound that listeners perceived as coming from an Asian body, became especially significant on the airwaves – a space where actual “yellowness” was unwelcome.

Radio, because it works to “render invisible the most common (that is, visual) markers of social difference, such as race, gender, or national identity,”<sup>20</sup> reveals the racial tensions that are used to define a national, white, American identity in opposition of minority voices like African and Asian Americans. This is most easily done through stereotyping, which sheds light on the “complexity of constructions of race in the United States and the important role [Asia and perceived Asian culture] played in the generation of an American identity and popular culture.”<sup>21</sup> The addition of yellowface in this

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<sup>18</sup> See Moon, *Yellowface* and Lee, *Orientalism* for the most comprehensive overview of vaudevillian yellowface.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas, 100-123.

<sup>20</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 116.

<sup>21</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 3.

discussion highlights how Americans culturally constructed race sonically, in conjunction with and in response to minorities. A closer analysis of yellowface complicates the white versus black binary in American culture, illustrating how Asians and Asian Americans would have navigated the American system of race.

### The Dynamic Nature of Whiteness:

As a particularly loaded term, whiteness is interwoven into a “web of social, political, and economic entanglements that define our nation and its people, for better or worse,” ultimately remaining an “elusive and abstract concept.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout the course of American history, whiteness was evoked in relation to citizenship. In the mid-nineteenth century, the right of naturalization was expanded from “any alien, being a free white person” in the Constitution to “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.”<sup>23</sup> Until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, whiteness as a category of race and citizenship was defined by an overly simplistic black/white binary, ignoring completely the presence of Native Americans. As immigrants flooded into the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the “law was forced to deal with an influx of individuals who did not fit so neatly into the constructed racial categories” of simply black and white.<sup>24</sup> Individuals sued the United States to be “declared white by law after being denied citizenship rights” on the “grounds of racial

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<sup>22</sup> John Tehranian, “Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America,” (*The Yale Law Review*, Vol. 109. No. 4, Jan. 2000), 818.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 818-819.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 819.



ineligibility.”<sup>25</sup> Popular culture reflected those concerns, playing a fundamental role in the conversation regarding the construction of race in American.

Nineteenth century anti-immigrant stereotypes were prevalent on the vaudeville stage alongside blackface and yellowface characterizations. By looking more carefully at the vaudeville tradition, we can better understand how it functions to “define and enforce ‘whiteness.’”<sup>26</sup> Vaudeville reinforced notions of racial inferiority, as it allowed “performers and audiences alike a freedom to behave excessively, to break the bonds of restrictive definitions of self, to violate norms and American customs while attributing those traits...to a ‘nonwhite other.’”<sup>27</sup> Ethnic humor, which went hand-in-hand with vaudeville, was particularly popular during the late nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth century, as people immigrated by the thousands. Lawrence Mintz argues that the “most immediate and obvious explanation for ethnic and racial joking” at the time “is that it allows for expression of hostility and superiority.”<sup>28</sup> As white America became increasingly nativist, vaudeville became an entertaining *and* effective way to spread anti-immigrant sentiment. Ethnic characterizations of immigrants were flat, simple regurgitations of stereotypes, where the:

Irish characters were drunk, belligerent, and dumb (dumb was the term commonly used in comedy – it meant stupid or unintelligent but it also meant culturally naïve, “green” or bewildered, “unhip” as well). The Italians are happy rascals, promiscuous, profligate, and irresponsible, comically hyper-emotional – and dumb... Jews are usually “canny...” in the sense of too clever, manipulative, dishonest – but they are also portrayed, perhaps surprisingly as dumb, especially

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” (*Melus*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1996), 24.

as lacking in “street smarts,” and potential suckers. Jewish men are also particularly weak, cowardly, the victims of bullies (including Jewish women).<sup>29</sup>

Many of the same tropes utilized in anti-immigrant vaudeville were also employed in yellowface and blackface vaudeville theatrical performances and in Golden Age radio programming. Ethnic characterizations of other immigrant groups, like the Irish, faded by the 1920’s. Mintz attributes that decline not only to assimilation but to the activism of different ethnic groups, like the “Society for the Prevention of Ridiculous and Perverse Misrepresentation of the Irish Character.”<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the fading of anti-Irish and other anti-immigrant ethnic characterizations also reflected the shifting definition of whiteness. Once vehemently excluded from socioeconomic, political, and cultural activities within the United States, Irish immigrants eventually found themselves under the umbrella of whiteness while the exclusion of both African and Asian Americans persisted.

Two landmark naturalization cases, *Takao Ozawa v. The United States* in 1922 and *The United States v. Baghat Singh Thind* in 1923, dealt explicitly with what it meant to be American, an Asian immigrant, and a white citizen. Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, petitioned for naturalization. When his application was denied, he took it all the way to the supreme court. It was there that he and his lawyers argued that he was completely assimilated and could therefore become a citizen of the United States. His petition was rejected by the courts, claiming that he was not a member of what was “popular known as the Caucasian race.”<sup>31</sup> Regardless of how assimilated Ozawa claimed to be, his race prevented him from becoming an American citizen. Baghat Thind was an immigrant from India, who petitioned for naturalization by claiming that he was a

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Lee, 141.

member of the Caucasian race due to the fact that he was a Hindu of a high caste.<sup>32</sup> While Thind claimed to share the same ancestors as other members of the Aryan race, the court argued that his “ethnological argument, while plausible, was irrelevant” because “racial categories were contingent not on ethnology or linguistics but on contemporary popular standards.”<sup>33</sup>

Together, these cases expanded legal definitions of whiteness, formally emphasizing for the first time that “race is not merely a scientific reality but a social construct.”<sup>34</sup> Whiteness became a convenient category of race, where all people “of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race” could converge.<sup>35</sup> This is important, moving past the particulars of each individual citizen to the “ideology of ‘common sense’ as a way in which race would be evaluated,” thus the “true test of ‘whiteness’ was in the eyes of the common man.”<sup>36</sup> These two naturalization cases, where each man was refused citizenship on racial grounds, proved immensely important in our lasting understanding of the complicated relationship between “ethnicity, race, and ideology” where “Asian immigrants, however assimilated” could not be members of the “Caucasian race.”<sup>37</sup>

Each case worked to emphasize that race could not be defined scientifically but would be largely determined by the performance of whiteness. The dynamics of race and whiteness converge and change over time, making the resilience of anti-Asian stereotypes particularly noteworthy. For example, we see one of the most reviled groups of immigrants, the Irish, ultimately succeeded in becoming “white,” moving from an

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>34</sup> Tehranian, 819.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, 141.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

“oppressed race” to “part of an oppressing race in America.”<sup>38</sup> Popular sentiment and performance of race worked in tandem to become the ultimate arbiter of race in America. We can see how the *Ozawa* case and the *Thind* case “reflected the judgment of ordinary Americans fully awakened to the Yellow Peril.”<sup>39</sup> It should be reiterated that both cases coincided with the introduction of radio as a mass medium, an important point when one considers the substantial impact radio had on the formulation of popular opinion during the twentieth century. Conceptions of whiteness and notions of masculinity were critical to Golden Age listeners, where programs frequently “normalize[ed] the aural tastes and standards of white elite masculinity as the singular way to interpret sonic information.”<sup>40</sup> The intersection of race and gender in the formation of a national identity was crucial where, “by gendering race, especially the effeminizing of the Chinese males,” American popular culture could put forth the belief that “masculine gender identity was preserved for white men.”<sup>41</sup> This will, of course, be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

In this way, listening became yet another way for white radio listeners to assert their dominance over Asians and Asian Americans, suppressing other voices and representations from finding homes on the airwaves. By doing this, radio reinforced and expanded the Asian American image, profoundly impacting their social, cultural, and legal place in society. Radio, as a completely unprecedented technology, worked to create racialized spaces on a national scale. Because radio took away the visible element of race,

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<sup>38</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 1995), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, 144. The concept of the Yellow Peril will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, “The Yellow Peril.”

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race & The Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Judy Tsou, “Gendering Race: Stereotypes of Chinese Americans in Popular Sheet Music,” (*Repercussions* 6, Fall 2001), 62.

programmers and listeners found it particularly important to intensify the “use of sonic cues to stereotype, exclude, segregate, discriminate against, and justify violence against people of color.”<sup>42</sup> Radio historian Michele Hilmes writes:

As an aural medium, freed from the use of visual representations that dominated other popular culture forms... in which race, defined as skin color, disappeared... In order to contain the danger that removal of America’s primary method of making racial and social distinction threatened, early radio worked hard to confine representations of African Americans and other “nonwhites” within the narrow and derogatory categories set up by the minstrel tradition... White became the default mode of radio representation, not simply by habit or common agreement or convenience, but deliberately and forcefully through a system of representation that carefully overdetermined [sic] this distinction.<sup>43</sup>

Because Asian Americans were easily distinguishable and quickly defined as an “other,” their presence on the radio worked to “emphasize the significance of belonging.”<sup>44</sup> Listeners capitalized on this notion, which reinforced the idea that various minority members could never truly belong in American society and culture. Marginalized minority groups, like Asians and Asian Americans, were “both ‘overlooked’ – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and at the same time, overdetermined – psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic.”<sup>45</sup> This idea becomes particularly important when one considers the nationalistic impulse of radio.

Radio programmers and listeners used radio to emphasize notions of whiteness in an effort to clarify “who has power and who does not.”<sup>46</sup> By understanding how

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<sup>42</sup> Stoeber, 231.

<sup>43</sup> Hilmes, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 70.

<sup>45</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 236 quotes in Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 65.

whiteness defines itself against a racialized other, or the idea that “people come to understand themselves as white through a process by which they know who they are by what they are not,” we can better grasp the social meaning of yellowface.<sup>47</sup>

Representations of the Oriental became essential for listeners, as yellowface worked to solidify whiteness, an “identity that does not come from the inside so much as being defined by what is not observed to be constitutive of the other.”<sup>48</sup>

### The Yellow Peril:

Like blackface, yellowface on the radio allowed performers to inscribe conceptions of Asian otherness to their voice. A key difference, though, lies in the indelibly alien nature of Asians and Asian Americans, alien being a term that “describes things that are immediate and present” and ultimately “unalterable,” “threatening,” and “always out of place, therefore disturbing and dangerous.”<sup>49</sup> It should be reiterated that East Asian populations were generally concentrated regionally across America, the biggest enclave being along the West Coast. This certainly contributes to the creation and proliferation of stereotypes of the Oriental as alien, exotic, and threatening. Because radio could reach audiences across the country, it would have been especially successful at transmitting and reproducing yellowface stereotypes to areas where actual Asian presence may have been limited. This gave credence to the perpetuation of oversimplified stereotypes, conveyed sonically and often inspired by the Yellow Peril. The notion of Yellow Peril comes in waves, representing various fears associated with Asian

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Lee, 3.

Americans but rooted in the deep-seated fear about an “invasion from the sleeping giant of Asia.”<sup>50</sup> The spreading of Yellow Peril facilitated the formation of a vision of America that excluded Asians by promoting a national identity dependent on whiteness.

The first wave of Yellow Peril was associated with the Chinese, who migrated to California in large numbers after the discovery of gold in 1849. Inspired by blackface representations of African Americans, performers at this time were “well aware of the lyrical and musical devices as well as those of gesture, costuming, and makeup that could be used to mark Chinese immigrants as inferior,” creating songs that “helped to define and circulate anti-Chinese sentiments throughout the Far West.”<sup>51</sup> Race and gender intersected in a particularly clear way during this era: East Asian men were either hyper-masculine, taking jobs from white men during the Gold Rush, or effeminate, portrayed as doing women’s work like cooking or laundry.

In contrast, East Asian women were virtually invisible during this period, largely due to the Page Law in 1875, which barred the immigration of women from “China, Japan, or any Oriental country” to America in an effort to curb prostitution.<sup>52</sup> Notions of immorality were gendered, as Chinese men were frequently associated with opium and Chinese women were associated with prostitution. Because women were legally barred from entering the United States on the basis of their immorality, Asian men operated outside of the traditional Victorian family structure as bachelors. They frequently did not

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<sup>50</sup> Tim Yang, “The Malleable Yet Undying Nature of the Yellow Peril,” accessed 23 November 2016, <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~hist32/History/S22%20-The%20Malleable%20Yet%20Undying%20Nature%20of%20the%20Yellow%20Peril.htm>

<sup>51</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> George Anthony Pepper, “Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women Under the Page Law, 1875-1882,” (*Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 1986), 28.

have children or wives, so this allowed for both their status as citizens and their gender identities to be questioned. As the Gold Rush progressed and white working-class fears increased, songs about Chinese worked to “codify stereotypes and expressed fears that led ultimately to exclusionary legislation” embodied in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>53</sup> The Page Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act worked in tandem to prevent both the immigration and reproduction of the Chinese, in an effort to limit the spread of the Yellow Peril. Popular culture reflected these fears of a Yellow Peril, working to portray Chinatowns as centers of crime, as opium dens, as outdated and backwards neighborhoods that were increasingly dangerous. The adoption of yellowface in popular culture allowed fears to be assuaged through “one-dimensional characterizations” of Orientals as “opium addicts and soft geishas, comforting in their stereotypical predictability.”<sup>54</sup>

In the wake of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese immigrants readily came to the United States. Well aware of the experience of Chinese immigrants, the Japanese government “took pains to select and prepare Japanese emigrants for life in America,” encouraging assimilatory practices and the incorporation of American values into everyday life.<sup>55</sup> Japanese immigrants in America enjoyed a kind of favored status over Chinese immigrants during the late nineteenth century. As will be discussed, the notions of who embodied a “good” Oriental and a “bad” Oriental shifted based on American foreign policy, and the Japanese did not hold this favored status for long. Yellow Peril was applied to the Japanese in 1905, when their victory over the Russians in the Russo-

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<sup>53</sup> Moon, *Yellowface*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Michelle Su-mei Liu, “Acting Out: Images of Asians and the Performance of American Identities, 1898-1945,” Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University, 2003. p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> Lee, 141.



Japanese War shook many Americans.<sup>56</sup> This led to further legal action, including the 1917 Immigration Restriction Act and the National Origins Act of 1924, barring East Asian immigrants from both entering the United States and attaining citizenship. In this, the “vision of the menace from the East was always more racial rather than national” as it “derived not from concern with any one country or people in particular, but from a vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed, of color.”<sup>57</sup>

After the attacks on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in 1941, this concept of a Yellow Peril was reinvigorated nationally. Asians and Asian Americans were yet again characterized as unassimilable – making them not only inferior but their mere presence detrimental to white Americans. In fact, this embodiment of the unassimilable other was used not only as means to culturally exclude Asians from mainstream America, but politically and legally as well.<sup>58</sup> The Yellow Peril worked to fuel anti-Asian sentiment, which led to not only legal restrictions on immigration but ultimately the internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II with Executive Order 9066 in 1942. In this, the US government had become deeply invested in delineating between the Japanese and the Chinese.

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<sup>56</sup> Yang, “The Malleable Yet Undying Nature of the Yellow Peril.”

<sup>57</sup> John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 156 quoted in Yang, “The Malleable Yet Undying Nature of the Yellow Peril.”

<sup>58</sup> The most obvious example of this being the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which “banned all Chinese immigration laborers from entering the country.” The Act was not overturned until the passage of the Naturalization and Immigration Act in 1965 (Moon, *Yellowface*, 32). It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline all legal restrictions related to Asian Americans including, but not limited to, the Immigration Act of 1924, the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, and Executive Order 9066 which authorized the internment of Japanese American citizens and immigrants during WWII.

Yellow Peril had become distinctly Japanese given the fact that the Chinese were American allies. This is not to say that yellowface caricatures stopped for other Asians and Asian Americans, but they were certainly softened. The Japanese were depicted as an evil external and internal enemy threatening to overtake American culture and values. As we will see, this shifts again after the war when the real cultural threat becomes the communists. Notions of a Yellow Peril changed over time, but were readily applied to groups based on socioeconomic, political, or global pressures. Yellowface tropes were frequently reconfigured but always reflected a “series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body,”<sup>59</sup> which ultimately manifested itself in legal exclusion. In this instance, the aural contribution of the radio cannot be overstated.

#### Sonic Yellowface:

While some vaudeville-era stereotypes did not resurface on the radio, yellowface (like blackface) re-emerged fully intact. The airwaves carried with them universal themes of the inferior Oriental: the pidgin English, the bumbling effeminate chinaman, the evil and hyper-sexualized female. The Asian American body could be conveyed in many ways, all harkening back to anti-immigrant and anti-Asian sentiment popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

The slit-eyed bucktooth Jap thrusting his bayonet, thirsty for blood. The inscrutable, wily Chinese detective with his taped eyelids and wispy moustache. The childlike, indolent Filipino houseboy. Always giggling. Bowing and scraping. Eager to please, but untrustworthy. The sexless, hairless Asian male. The servile, oversexed Asian female. The Geisha... The serpentine, cunning Dragon Lady.

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<sup>59</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 101.

Mysterious and evil, eager to please. Effeminate. Untrustworthy. Yellow Peril. Fortune Cookie Psychic. Savage. Dogeater. Invisible. Mute... Gooks.<sup>60</sup>

Yellowface was effective because it marked “the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental,” ultimately placing “the Oriental in racial opposition to whiteness,” with “exaggerated ‘racial’ features that have been designated ‘Oriental,’ such as ‘slanted’ eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color.”<sup>61</sup> Lee notes that “only the racialized Oriental is yellow; Asians are not. Asia is not a biological fact but a geographic designation,” allowing race to operate as an “ideology through which unequal distributions of wealth and power are naturalized” and ultimately “justified.”<sup>62</sup> It is important to recognize that, despite what we may identify as a positive or negative stereotype, any acknowledgment of this divide “inadvertently legitimates the racial discourse of the Oriental that produces both the coolie and the [model] minority,”<sup>63</sup> both of which will be discussed later.

The clearest, and most prevalent, example of sonic yellowface is the adoption of pidgin English.<sup>64</sup> It goes without saying that, given the vast differences between various East Asian languages and accents, pidgin English is not only an oversimplified trope but also reflects deep anxieties regarding citizenship. Broken English is utilized in nearly every sonic example throughout this thesis, from nineteenth century phonographic recordings to radio programs from the 1950s. The decision to utilize pidgin English is critical to notions of American identity, nationality, and citizenship. The idea that Asians in American could not speak English properly, with correct grammar and syntax and

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<sup>60</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1993), xxii.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> The term pidgin English, as a form of simplified English, originated in China during the seventeenth century as a trade language.

without the addition of vowel sounds or the dropping of ‘r’ sounds, meant they could never be a part of American democracy. Broken English emphasizes the fact that Orientals were unassimilable, harkening back to who could be considered true Americans. Proper English, an integral part an educated and informed citizenry, is a prerequisite for participation in civic activities like voting. Even when Asians are portrayed as being educated and intelligent, broken English was utilized to remind listeners that Asian Americans could never be true citizens.

Thus far, many scholars have examined how the “production and performance of Asian Americanness [*sic*] within the context of a U.S. culture” has relied upon the “cultural and political abjection” of Asians in America.<sup>65</sup> I build upon much of the work of these scholars, extending their arguments past the visual realm and into the sonic realm. By recognizing how an Asian identity was created by radio programming during the Golden Age, we can extend this idea of performance aurally. Karen Shimakawa notes that Asian American identity “occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation – *but it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object.*”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the inherent function of Asian American identity, as a product of a desire for white American cultural

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<sup>65</sup> Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2-3.

<sup>66</sup> Shimakawa continues: “the abject, it is important to note, does not achieve a (stable) status of *object* – the term often used to describe the position of (racially or sexually) disenfranchised groups in analyses of the politics of representation. Rather, I deploy the discourse of *abjection* in describing Asian American performance because... ‘there is nothing objective or objectionable to the abject’... For what characterizes Asian Americanness [*sic*] as it comes into visibility in the present study is its constantly shifting relation to Americanness [*sic*], a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation, it is that *movement between*, I argue, that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes legal) citizenship.” Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 3.

hegemony, is “symbolic coherence,” where Asians and Asian Americans “continually must be both made present and jettisoned.”<sup>67</sup> It is through this revelation that this work can help to bring “Asian America ‘nearer to the roots of [their] oppression’ and to contribute to the dismantling of the apparatus which enforces Asian American invisibility.”<sup>68</sup>

Yellowface stereotyping must be recognized as a constantly evolving process wherein the dominant group chooses how to represent a subaltern group. In this, we understand that some stereotypes are “debased, some are picturesque, some are seductive, others are threatening” but “all are evidently distortions that reveal more about the interests and motivations of observers than they do about whoever is notionally represented.”<sup>69</sup> Because there is limited information available regarding how Asian Americans understood and imbibed these stereotypical representations themselves on the radio (as well as the fact that Asian American voices were, in large part, absent from major network broadcasts during the Golden Age and were thus not preserved), the bulk of this thesis will focus on what it meant for white America and how sonic yellowface on the radio reflected and reproduced American anxieties.

By understanding the ways in which “white racism enforces white supremacy” or a “system of order and a way of perceiving reality [in order to] keep whites on top,”<sup>70</sup> we can better understand how radio programming reflected and reinforced sonic intolerance.

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<sup>67</sup> Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 22, quoted in Robert C. Lancefield, “Hearing Orientality in (White) America, 1900-1930,” (Doctoral Dissertation, Wesleyan University, 2004), 20.

<sup>70</sup> Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love” in *Seeing Through Shuck*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 65.

Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan emphasize how racialized stereotypes come in one of two forms, “the acceptable model and the unacceptable model” where the “unacceptable model is unacceptable because he cannot be controlled by whites” and the “acceptable model is acceptable because he is tractable.”<sup>71</sup> We see this clearly in the dichotomy between the Dragon Lady and the China Doll/Lotus Blossom or the villainous Fu Manchu and the docile Charlie Chan – idealized and heavily racialized stereotypes that are easy to maintain throughout history, as it seems they have become “authenticated and historically verified.”<sup>72</sup> These stereotypes functioned as a way to “establish and preserve order between different elements of society, maintain the continuity and growth of Western civilization, and enforce white supremacy with a minimum of effort, attention, and expense.”<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, the image of the Oriental in America, flattened by over a century of stereotypes, became a kind of “guardian of white supremacy, dependent on it and grateful to it.”<sup>74</sup>

Jennifer Stoever’s *The Sonic Color Line: Race & The Cultural Politics of Listening* introduces the concept of a sonic color line, or the “process of racializing sound – how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds – and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness.’”<sup>75</sup> By extending Stoever’s notion of a sonic color line to include Asian and Asian American voices, we can better understand how the radio racialized sound as well as how the “dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>75</sup> Stoever, 7.

conform to the sonic color line's norms."<sup>76</sup> Radio was not used simply as entertainment in America, a society "built on the conflict between democratic ideology and a tenuously balanced – but rigorously defended – system of structured social inequity."<sup>77</sup> Rather, the "powerfully charged social elements" like "race, ethnicity, gender, and public cultural authority" became especially significant.<sup>78</sup> Radio's popularity coincided with critical moments in American history: the 1920's an era of unstable decadence and an increasingly nativist outlook, the 1930's an era marked by the Great Depression and a perceived loss of masculinity, the 1940's an era of global war, and the 1950's as an era of rising conservatism and consumerism. Each of these moments creating the unique circumstances for the construction of an Oriental image in direct opposition to white America, representing a threat to the American notion of race, family, and the nation as a whole.

#### An Overview:

This thesis will look at radio programming and how aural representations of the Oriental on the airwaves worked to underscore and reinforce Yellow Peril. In doing so, it becomes especially important to recognize how radio "presented opportunities for cultural expression and national self-definition never before available" by creating "a system of meanings...of transmission of cultural values and mediation of cultural tensions that valorized and 'made common' some aspects of everyday experience and marginalized or excluded others."<sup>79</sup> The first chapter will delve into some of the top

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

scholarship regarding Asian American cultural history, which deals largely with the visual realm of yellowface. This thesis builds upon scholarship regarding not only Asian American cultural history but also the relationship between radio, race, and sound. Because of the interdisciplinary approach to this work, several different frameworks will be discussed. Chapter Two will trace the first instances of aural yellowface via phonographic recordings of early comedy skits and songs.

The rest of this work will be delineated by genres. This was an intentional choice, both to highlight the breadth of yellowface programming and to demonstrate how yellowface stereotypes resurfaced across genres and were reconfigured in different ways depending on the audience and the kind of program. Chapter Three will look at the popular comedy programs *The Fred Allen Show*, *Texaco Star Theatre*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and *Gasoline Alley*. These programs exaggerated yellowface stereotypes in the name of comedy, confirming to listeners certain cultural characteristics that worked to shape white American national identity. Chapter Four will examine the crime-fighting melodramas *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, *Mr. I.A. Moto*, and *The Shadow of Fu Manchu*. These melodramas reflected the shifting terrain of the “good Oriental” versus the “bad Oriental,” which is emphasized most clearly in the characters of Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. The last chapter, Chapter Five, explores the adventure and superhero programs *Terry and the Pirates*, *The Shadow*, *The Green Hornet*, *The Amazing Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*, and *The Adventures of Superman*. These programs, all of which were sonically adapted from comic books, were especially popular with children.



Throughout this work, I will utilize the term Oriental as a way to indicate the intentional lumping of Asians and Asian Americans into a homogenous yellow. This kind of strategic essentialism allowed radio programming to capitalize on this lumping, sonically constructing an Oriental that could be mobilized politically, culturally, socially, and economically. By disseminating these programs on a national (and accessible) scale, radio allowed programmers to reimagine visual stereotypes as aural stereotypes, reflecting and reinforcing white supremacy. In my investigation of this little-studied slice of American popular culture, I will highlight the linkages between radio, aural representations of race, yellowface stereotypes, and the quest for a white national identity. Through a closer examination of yellowface on the radio, I create an alternate (but complimentary) framework for understanding the formation of race, gender, and national identity in America during the first half of the twentieth century.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

My work is both informed by and contributes to the broader conversation regarding multiple areas of scholarship, including cultural history of Asian Americans and literature regarding radio, sound, and race. Scholars Susan Douglas, Jason Loviglio, Christine Ehrick, Michele Hilmes, and Dolores Inés Casillas have opened up new avenues for a critical study of voice on the radio.<sup>80</sup> The work of Nina Eidsheim, Jennifer Stoever, Kate Lacey, and Reina Prado have challenged traditional understandings of sound studies, looking more analytically at the politics of listening, and pushing the idea that listening is a “form of agency.”<sup>81</sup> My work extends their research by introducing notions of an Asian voice and sound into the larger conversation of aural race and racism, which has largely focused on a black/white binary.<sup>82</sup> Most significantly though, I locate this work within the broader scheme of Asian American cultural history, a field of

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<sup>80</sup> There is growing literature regarding voice on the radio. See, for example, Douglas, *Listening In*; Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*; Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*; Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; and Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging*.

<sup>81</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race & The Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 17. As sounds studies expands, scholars have been looking closely at the relationship sound has with the construction of race. Along with Stoever's work, see Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera;” Lacey, *Listening Publics*; and Prado, “Sonic Brownface: Representations of Mexicanness in an Era of Discontent.”

<sup>82</sup> Both Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line* and Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera” delve into this binary.

historic literature that has grown considerably since the mid-1990s, but still has several significant gaps.<sup>83</sup>

Influenced by various aspects of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and feminism, several scholars have carefully considered the complicated relationship between Asian Americans and the American mass media.<sup>84</sup> A handful of books have been published that have been specifically helpful in both understanding how notions of race, ethnicity, gender, nationalism, sexuality, and identity converge with mass media. On the whole, these books are limited to visual culture, looking at vaudeville and theatrical performances, paintings, cartoons, photographs, film, and television. Scholars from many different fields of history have worked to convey how Asian Americans have been *visually* depicted in popular culture, an immensely helpful body of work for the foundation of my research. Historians James S. Moy, Robert G. Lee, and Krystyn R. Moon have helped to establish a basic framework for my investigation while the work of Jason Loviglio, Alexander Russo, and Jason Crum has opened up new modes of inquiry into Asian representation during the Golden Age of radio.<sup>85</sup>

#### Foundational Literature:

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<sup>83</sup> See Chan, “Asian American Historiography” and “The Changing Contours of Asian-American Historiography,” and Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* for more information.

<sup>84</sup> See Moy, *Marginal Sights*; Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*; Moon, *Yellowface*; Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*; Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*; and Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental*.

<sup>85</sup> See Russo, “A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*”; Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy*; and Crum, “‘Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East’ Techno-Orientalism in Early Twentieth Century U.S. Radio Broadcasting.”

Theatre Arts historian James S. Moy's *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, published in 1993, investigates a plethora of visual imagery relating to Chinese Americans (which he extends to all Asian Americans and ultimately other marginalized peoples).<sup>86</sup> His careful analysis of sources, ranging from museum displays to theatre to pornography, emphasizes the way that race and racism is intrinsically linked to American popular culture. Moy's use of postcolonialism compliments his thoughtful reflection on the cultural production of and fascination with an "other" in America. By looking at how dominant cultures subject subaltern groups, Moy notes that "since the beginning of the Western tradition in drama, dominant cultures have represented marginal or foreign racial groups in a manner that presents these characters as othered – that is, not only as different from people in the dominant culture but also as less than completely human or civilized."<sup>87</sup> This need, Moy argues, to "demean or dehumanize these othered people serves to maintain or reestablish an advantage for the dominant culture" as "playwrights and audiences alike have been fascinated with racial difference."<sup>88</sup>

These distorted and demeaning images of Asian Americans, inspired by the Yellow Peril and perpetuated by American popular culture, have shifted over time but are prevalent nonetheless. Moy traces the evolution of these stereotypes, noting how new constructions of old caricatures find new life in mediums like film (where the reinscription of the "colonial gaze" is especially obvious). Moy's poststructuralist understanding of the legacy of nineteenth century stereotypes has informed more recent work on the cultural history of Asian Americans. By deconstructing white hegemony and

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<sup>86</sup> James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

challenging notions of representation in America, Moy's contribution to future scholars is substantial. He urges future scholars to use cultural evidence to engage with interconnections between race, gender, and other socioeconomic factors. His analysis of the marginalization of Asians in America reveals how "Anglo-America patronizes products that affirm the position of the dominant culture."<sup>89</sup> But, Moy's work fails to take into account the aural nature of these stereotypes, focusing instead entirely on visual representation. Because this work offers readers a wide-ranging look into a century and a half of Asian American representation, the fact that radio is left out is telling.

#### The Six Faces of the Oriental:

Moy's work on how American popular culture ultimately maintained white American superiority by marginalizing Asians, by distorting their cultural traditions, and through the perpetuating stereotypes compliments the work by Historian Robert G. Lee. Lee's *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, published in 1999, offers readers an extraordinarily comprehensive look at the development of Asian stereotypes in American mass media.<sup>90</sup> Lee's work has been invaluable to my research, as he has carefully combed through well over a century's worth of popular culture, identifying key yellowface tropes and stereotypes that have persevered through time. He is quick to note that the "Oriental as a racial category is never isolated from struggles over race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and national identity," arguing that popular culture is a constantly evolving process that defines "American nationality" or "who 'real Americans' are in any

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>90</sup> Robert G Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

given historical moment.”<sup>91</sup> Lee understands that race as a social category can also be a “category of social difference” that is “present everywhere in the social formation and deeply imbedded in the popular culture.”<sup>92</sup> Through this, Lee has pinpointed what he deems as the six faces of the Oriental: the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the Yellow Peril, the model minority, and the gook, all of which “portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family.”<sup>93</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I find it especially important to discuss these six faces in detail.

The first face, the pollutant, first appeared in California during the mid-nineteenth century, where the very presence of, in this instance specifically the Chinese, polluted the popular image of California as a kind of “free-soil Eden.”<sup>94</sup> In this, the Chinese were identified with the “moral chaos of the Gold Rush” and “portrayed as the harbingers of industrial wage slavery,” meaning that the very notion of California as “both free and racially pure demanded the removal, or at least the exclusion” of the Chinese.<sup>95</sup> Lee’s discussion of minstrel shows, which he argues were particularly important for the construction of the Chinese as pollutants, is significant. He argues that the “minstrel representation of the Chinese immigrant as a racial Other relied on a trope of insurmountable cultural difference.”<sup>96</sup> Lee compared instances of blackface, where the humor arose from the fact that these black caricatures lacked culture, with yellowface, where the Asian caricatures were “seen as having an excess of culture” which led them into a “state of degradation and cultural degeneration,” carrying with them “connotations

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

of disease, contagion, and pollution.”<sup>97</sup> The next face of the Oriental, the coolie, originated as a representation of the Chinese immigrant worker who joined the working class during the late nineteenth century. The Chinese coolie was portrayed as “unfree and servile, a threat to the white working man’s family, which in turn was the principal symbol of an emergent working class.”<sup>98</sup> Lee argues that because of the increasing importance of skilled labor, unskilled or common labor became racialized. In this section, Lee’s analysis of a collection of popular plays and poems prove to be particularly impressive.

The Oriental as a deviant represents the “possibility of alternative desire in a period during which middle-class gender roles and sexual behavior were being codified and naturalized into a rigid heterosexual cult of domesticity.”<sup>99</sup> Yellowface, in this instance, manifested itself into a “figure of foreign desire,” which worked to justify a “taboo against intimacy through which racial and class stability could be preserved.”<sup>100</sup> Lee’s discussion of the Chinese as a “third sex,” operating as an “alternative or imagined sexuality that was potentially subversive and disruptive to the emergent heterosexual orthodoxy.”<sup>101</sup> Caricatures of Asian women were introduced, further gendering stereotypical representations of what was still largely Chinese immigrant communities.

The presence of Chinese immigrants in Victorian society threatened the traditional sexual and gendered order. Lee writes that the “relations of desire with the Oriental (male or female) offered an alternative (albeit a tabooed one) to the social order

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

represented by the racially exclusive, presumptively heterosexual nuclear family” where “Oriental sexuality was constructed as ambiguous, inscrutable, and hermaphroditic.”<sup>102</sup> It is also important to note that Asian women were almost completely invisible in nineteenth century popular culture, and if she were represented at all, she was “victimized, passive, and silent.”<sup>103</sup> Ultimately, the representation of the “Oriental as both seductively childlike and threateningly sexual allowed for both sympathy and repulsion.”<sup>104</sup> This level of invisibility for Asian women would change in the twentieth century with the addition of the Dragon Lady stereotype in the 1930s. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Asians in America became increasingly feared, as they were represented as a threat to the foundations of the country. Americans took up the mandate of colonialism, bringing with it a deep fear of the formalization of notions of a Yellow Peril. Lee argues that the creation of the Yellow Peril coincided with the “consolidation of whiteness,” where members of the “Anglo-Saxon ‘race’” were joined together by a belief in their common heritage.<sup>105</sup> This exaggerated (and vague) nationalism, where all Anglo-Saxon members were part of a common heritage, increased social and political discrimination against Asians, ultimately setting the stage for the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

Sax Rohmer, in his series of novels called *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Machu*, the first published in 1913, is responsible for creating one of the most enduring images of Yellow Peril in popular culture. Rohmer’s infamous Dr. Fu Manchu was “the Yellow Peril

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107.



incarnate in one man.”<sup>106</sup> Lee writes, the “tales of Fu Manchu harnessed the great tradition of Orientalism to the purposes of Yellow Peril hysteria,” ultimately working to collapse any distinction between various Asian ethnicities.<sup>107</sup> Films produced during the early twentieth century were riddled with references to Chinatown, highlighting the threat of a Yellow Peril in major cities across the country. The development of this particular stereotype is clearly represented in later radio programming, most significantly in popular crime-fighting melodramas where the stories are rife with motifs of Chinatown and the Yellow Peril. Chinatowns were frequently portrayed as dark, dangerous, dirty, and poverty-stricken. Shrouded in the smoke from opium dens, Chinatowns were characterized almost as their own foreign country within the United States – alien and un-American. Chinatowns were immoral places, starkly different from other neighborhoods throughout America.

The development of the last two faces of the Oriental, Lee argues, occurs later in the twentieth century. Lee argues that the model minority myth rose in popularity during the Cold War, becoming especially significant in the 1960s as Asian Americans were depicted in direct contrast with African Americans as both “nonmilitant” and “nonpolitical.”<sup>108</sup> I do, however, see aspects of the model minority stereotype in aural representations of Oriental detectives on the radio, most notably Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto. This will be discussed in detail in later chapters. Lee also places the development of the model minority myth alongside another curious development in racialized stereotyping – the Asian as a gook, which become especially popular during the Vietnam

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

War. In this, Asian Americans become “contradictory and contested,” as they are simultaneously the model minority, “productive and acquiescent” and the Yellow Peril, “invisible and destructive.”<sup>109</sup> Overall, the contributions of Lee to the field of Asian American cultural history cannot be overstated. His remarkably thorough analysis of Asian presence in popular culture forms the basis of much of my understanding of the development and perpetuation of yellowface in America.

#### Asian American Music and Theatre:

Recently, scholarship has begun to engage with musical instances of yellowface, exploring sonic intolerance through music and theatre. Scholars like Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Judy Tsou, Robert C. Lancefield, Michelle Su-mei Liu, and Krystyn R. Moon have made significant contributions to the field of Asian American cultural history.<sup>110</sup> By building upon existing scholarship regarding anti-black and other anti-immigrant music and theatrical performances, scholars can better frame their own work regarding yellowface. The precarious position of Asians in America, built on exclusionary practices, makes this growth of scholarship particularly fruitful.

The most comprehensive contribution is Moon’s *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance 1850s-1920s*, published in 2005.<sup>111</sup> *Yellowface* works to effectively demonstrate how theatrical and musical

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>110</sup> See Garrett, “Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America’s Borders with Musical Orientalism;” Tsou, “Gendering Race: Stereotypes of Chinese Americans in Popular Sheet Music;” Lancefield, “Hearing Orientality in (White) America;” Liu, “Acting Out;” and Moon, *Yellowface*.

<sup>111</sup> Krystyn R. Moon’s *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

performances worked to construct Chinese identity in American popular culture. Moon traces the various contributions of both white and Chinese performers, composers, writers, and consumers in the creation, perpetuation, and rejection of yellowface during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This book is particularly important for Asian American cultural history, building upon the work of both Moy and Lee and providing an exceptionally detailed look at the development and dissemination of yellowface through theatre and music. By building on the work of other other cultural historians, Moon's research proves to be a valuable contribution to the historical literature and a deeper understanding of how and why notions of yellowface were so popular from 1850 to 1920.

Moon's discussion of popular songs about Chinese immigration from 1850 to 1882 (when the Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented) is particularly significant, as she uses that as a springboard for her analysis of how cultural developments can impact political and legal policies. The music and performances that were popular during this time worked to justify the immense discrimination that Chinese residents encountered. Moon's discussion of John Chinaman, a caricature of Chinese men that many songs of the time utilized, works to emphasize the connections with notions of blackface during that time – John Chinaman existing in the same vein as the Jim Crow or Zip Coon characters. Through a detailed analysis of songs that utilize this trope, Moon illuminates several yellowface representations that remained in place for more than a century, like the Chinese man as a laundryman. Moon's discussion of Bret Harte's "Heathen Chinee" helps to demonstrate the beginnings of the notions of a Yellow Peril in California, later spreading across the country. Yellowface impersonations and songs allowed Americans

to firmly mark Chinese immigrants as inferior, deviant, and unassimilable, expressing their anxieties with anti-Chinese stereotypes and lyrical devices. Moon continues to expertly weave lyrics and sheet music into her critical analysis of the shift to explicitly anti-Chinese music prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Moon then moves from the 1880s to the 1920s, where there was a shift from a distinctly anti-Chinese stereotyping to a more encompassing anti-Asian stereotyping. Moon's analysis of music works to demonstrate how musical composition could convey aural stereotypes and a distinctly Asian sound. The stereotypes became more complicated as more caricatures were introduced, females were included, and the notion of a Chinatown was introduced. Significantly, Moon delves into the complicated relationship between African Americans, Asian Americans, and yellowface. Writers, composers, and actors utilized yellowface and blackface to establish the "inferiority of both groups through comic interaction and conflict,"<sup>112</sup> creating a distinct "other." The crucial difference, Moon argues, was that Chinese immigrants were seen as foreign and unassimilable, while African Americans, who were nonetheless inferior to white Americans, were still seen as *Americans*. While white artists could easily call upon blackface and yellowface stereotypes in their music and theatrical performance, Moon points out that African American artists also actively called upon anti-Asian stereotypes – highlighting anxieties felt by the black community about the impact of Chinese immigration.

Moon emphasizes the idea that while African American "parodies of Chinese immigrants were related to interracial conflict and awareness of the power of blackface

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

caricatures,” they also had different intentions.<sup>113</sup> Moon understands how African Americans used yellowface caricatures to “ally themselves with whites by marking the Chinese as different from the white norm, as they themselves had been marked” focusing on both “racial inferiority and the foreignness and inability of the Chinese to assimilate.”<sup>114</sup> By establishing themselves as inherently different from Chinese immigrants, African American music and vaudeville emphasized the fact that blacks belonged in American culture because they were ultimately and definitively American, allying themselves with white America. Moon provides solid evidence of this through careful analysis of various scripts and music.

Moon’s broad survey of yellowface from the 1850s to the 1920s is a welcome addition to the cultural historiography of Asian Americans. She is especially effective in her analysis of music, which is difficult given its non-textual nature, and what it means for the creation and perpetuations of Chinese stereotypes. *Yellowface* offers important insight into the contributions that theatre and music made in the development of yellowface in American popular culture. Many insights gleaned from this monograph compliment research into yellowface on the radio, working to illustrate the lasting implications of the practice that began in the 1850s. Because this overview ends in 1920, at the dawn of radio, it has worked to emphasize a gap in historic literature.

#### Racial and Ethnic Characterizations in American Popular Culture:

Asians and Asian Americans were critical elements in the formation of a racialized national identity in America. Therefore, I can also locate my work within the broader

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

conversation regarding racial and ethnic characterizations in popular culture. Historical literature regarding anti-black, anti-Irish, and anti-Jewish characterizations offer a framework for the development of this thesis. By recognizing how whiteness could be defined against races and ethnicities that were deemed to be inferior, we can better understand how popular culture helps to construct that “other.” John Tehranian looks at the performance of whiteness and how legal precedent reflects popular sentiment when constructing a white race while Theodore Allen’s landmark work *The Invention of the White Race* (1994) works to reiterate the dynamic evolution of whiteness.<sup>115</sup>

John Strausbaugh, William Barlow, and Susan Douglas explores the development and perpetuation of blackface in American popular culture.<sup>116</sup> Noel Ignatiev, Dale T. Knobel, and Jennifer Mooney work to demonstrate how anti-Irish characterizations in American popular culture reflected both an anti-immigrant mentality in the US and emphasizes the ever-changing but heavily racialized national identity.<sup>117</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz and Paul Buhle look at notions of anti-Semitism in American popular culture.<sup>118</sup> It is significant to note how yellowface stereotypes from nineteenth century vaudeville to twentieth century radio to twenty-first century television and movies have remained remarkably unchanged while other anti-immigrant stereotyping has faded. Shifting definitions of white and changing categories of race converged, encouraging the perpetuation of crude stereotypes of minorities in an effort to shore up a white national identity. Vaudevillian theatrical representations translate most clearly into comedy

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<sup>115</sup> See Tehranian, “Performing Whiteness” and Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*.

<sup>116</sup> See Strausbaugh, *Black Like You*; Barlow, *Voice Over*; and Douglas, *Listening In*.

<sup>117</sup> See Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*; Knobel, “A Vocabulary of Ethnic Perception;” Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville*.

<sup>118</sup> See Mintz “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” and Buhle, *From The Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*.

programs on the radio, so the relationship between different anti-black and anti-immigrant caricatures will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

#### Radio and Asians in America:

There are several scholars who have investigated facets of Asian and Asian American presence on the radio, opening up avenues for future research into this expanding mode of inquiry. Both Alexander Russo and Jason Loviglio have utilized radio case studies, *The Green Hornet* and *The Shadow* respectively, to look at the development of Oriental representations of Asians on the airwaves.<sup>119</sup> The most significant contribution to this field thus far has been Jason Crum's "'Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East' Techno-Orientalism in Early Twentieth Century U.S. Radio Broadcasting."<sup>120</sup> Crum's work on radio broadcasting as a kind of fantastical "techo-Orientalism" that demonstrates the "staging and configuration of a white U.S. national body against the constructed threat of a technologically and culturally inferior Asian Other" parallels my work in this thesis.<sup>121</sup>

Crum looks at broadcast programs like *Omar, the Wizard of Persia* and *Terry and the Pirates*, alongside works of fiction like Pearl S. Buck's *China to America*, in an effort to demonstrate the anxieties that accompanied an expanding US Empire. Crum's work offers a complimentary framework for understanding racialized depictions of the Oriental

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<sup>119</sup> See Russo, "A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*" and Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy*.

<sup>120</sup> Jason Crum, "'Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East' Techno-Orientalism in Early Twentieth Century U.S. Radio Broadcasting" in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. ed. by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. pp. 40-51.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

on the airwaves, focusing on the technological anxieties of the twentieth century, where the US played a perceived key role in the ushering in of modernity to Asia (both Eastern and Western Asia). Where this thesis will highlight how domestic anxieties figured into yellowface constructions of Asians and Asian Americans, Crum's work offers interested readers a broader look at how conceptions of the Oriental justify "domination of Asian Others abroad."<sup>122</sup>

A key difference between my work and the work of Crum, Russo, and Loviglio, is the emphasis on aural construction of race. By using the term yellowface, I focus on white America's role in the creation and perpetuation of demeaning stereotypes regarding the Oriental. By adding radio to this analysis, we can better see how this aural medium played a significant role in reinforcing these beliefs. Crum looks at how two important radio programs worked to "show that the leap into modernity for the United States was accomplished against the supposed technological inferiority of ethnicized and racialized Others," where the "amnesia of an imperialist past is made possible" by a "process whereby histories of racism, exclusion, and inferiority are effaced or recast as noble endeavors to civilize savages and bring exotics into modernity."<sup>123</sup> Operating from a domestic sphere, my work positions anti-Asian rhetoric in a different light. By focusing on sonic instances of yellowface, an underexplored avenue for the investigation of the sonic construction of race, we can better understand the important role of radio in reflecting and reinforcing a white, masculine, national identity for Americans. Both this

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



thesis and Crum's work emphasize the importance of how the creation of an Asian other "must be documented in order for erased histories to be reclaimed."<sup>124</sup>

### Conclusion:

By uniting Asian American cultural studies, sound studies, and radio history, my work highlights the significant gap in the historiography regarding Asian Americans in popular culture. Through interdisciplinary research, my thesis explores how listening during the Golden Age of radio was simultaneously impacted by cultural understandings of Asian Americans, a desire for white national hegemony, and deeply entrenched fears of a Yellow Peril. Joining the conversation that Loviglio, Russo, and Crum began, this work emphasizes how race and sound converged on the radio to create a historically significant moment in Asian American cultural history, one that had social, cultural, political, and legal implications for many throughout the twentieth century. While race is primarily visual, sound is "far from being vision's opposite" as it "frequently appears to be visuality's doppelganger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>125</sup> Stoeber, 4.

## PHONOGRAPHIC RECORDINGS

In 1877, Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. By the mid-1890s, Edison began to market his invention, producing Edison cylinders (and later circular disc records) that played music or vocal recordings for listeners through headphones. Competing with Edison's phonograph, Emile Berliner's gramophone came on the market shortly thereafter. While Edison's device meant "the listener had to come to the sound" by utilizing headphones, Berliner's invention, which produced sound through a funnel, allowed the "sound to come to the listener."<sup>126</sup> Together, these inventions revolutionized mass entertainment, bringing it into the home. Before then, "every sonic phenomenon," whether it was a politician's speech or a musical performance or a religious homily, "had possessed a unity of time and space" as it "occurred once, for a certain duration, in one place, and then it was gone forever."<sup>127</sup> These inventions changed the concept of listening forever.

The phonograph and the gramophone expanded the incorporation of music into everyday American life, making *listening* a social and even, at times, a patriotic activity. Radio ultimately capitalized on the success of these two inventions, making listening across the country a national activity, one that could be done simultaneously. Edison and

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<sup>126</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

Berliner revolutionized the entertainment industry, making recordings of music, comedy skits, and even political speeches accessible to mainstream America. David Suisman argues that, because of the phonograph, music changed the way America sounded.<sup>128</sup> The phonograph shaped the music industry because music was “a kind of sound that people actively, consciously produced and deliberately tried to control.”<sup>129</sup> The preserved phonographs that we still have access to in the twenty-first century have given us unprecedented insight into aural race coding in America. It is with these recordings that we have the first instances of purely sonic yellowface, which would have been disseminated across the United States.

The introduction of the phonograph during the late nineteenth century coincided with a “noticeable shift [that] occurred in American music that paralleled a shift in American attitudes on race and the practice of seeing Asia as monolithic.”<sup>130</sup> Through sound alone, American musicians, songwriters, and comedians realized that they could use “aural cues” to “mark the Chinese as Other.”<sup>131</sup> American songwriters used musical and lyrical devices to create a distinct sound for the Chinese, and ultimately any East Asian. Instruments, like the gong and the cymbal, were used in a kind of repetitive rhythm. For example, the popular tune “Chopsticks” worked to demonstrate “the intensification between Orientalist musical devices and Chinese themes.”<sup>132</sup> Songwriters gathered inspiration from Asia, writing songs that incorporated “African American traditions, Orientalist operas, Chinese instruments, and transcriptions of Chinese

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Krystyn R. Moon’s *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

melodies,” working to create a “more totalizing image of the Chinese as foreign and inferior through sounds associated with the non-western world.”<sup>133</sup>

The popularity of aural yellowface via phonographs, which coincided with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, facilitated the spread of a more open antagonism towards any and all Asian immigrants. Tin Pan Alley songwriters used contradictory conceptions of race, ethnicity, and gender to ensure that the Chinese in America were depicted as distinctly foreign and as an embodiment of Yellow Peril. Caricatures of Chinatowns, which Moon describes as a “racialized space,”<sup>134</sup> worked to further ostracize Asians, who belonged not in America but in exotic Chinatowns. Businesses, like restaurants and laundries, as well as crime syndicates associated with things like smuggling or opium dens, created images of a contradictory and thoroughly unmodern world. In many ways, Chinatowns became some of the best representations of Yellow Peril, as it embodied a nearby threat, a kind of “vice-ridden slum” right next door.<sup>135</sup> This representation continued into the twentieth century, finding resonance in popular recordings and, a bit later, on the radio.

For example, the song “In Blinky, Winky, Chinky, Chinatown,” a Victor Record from 1915, tells the story of Chinese drug dealers who sell opium openly and without fear of retribution by the police. The song assumes a kind of nefarious relationship between the Chinese and the police, where the lyrics are less than subtle: “on the corner see this

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<sup>133</sup> For more information on the “sounds of Chinese otherness,” see Moon’s *Yellowface* – specifically Chapter Four (pp. 86-111) and Chapter Five (pp.112-142). She notes that the “racialization of the Chinese, which was found most commonly through visual images and the written word, became more complete with the inclusion of sound” (111).

<sup>134</sup> Moon, 119.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

son of Hop / wink his eye and whisper to the cop.”<sup>136</sup> The song ends with indistinguishable “Chinese,” which listeners can infer as dialectical sounds of the Chinese trying to cut deals and sell drugs to the “sallow, shallow looking youth / with no regrets but lots of debts” in Chinatown.<sup>137</sup> This theme continues in many different songs, including “Chinese Blues” (1915), where Chinese immigrants, tired from washing “laundry all day” hope to feed their habit by buying more opium.<sup>138</sup>

In the song “Chong,” a Victor Record from 1919, we can clearly hear the use of pidgin English in an effort to delegitimize Asian men as part of American society. The chorus of the song is as follows:

Chong / he come from Hong Kong / where Chin-ee man play all-ee day on a drum  
 / Chong / no lik-ee that song / where Chin-ee man cry ‘way up high, sing-ee sung-  
 ay, mung-ay chick-a-lick-a-fung-ay / Chong / go back to Hong Kong / I bet-cha  
 he teach-ee his China girl how to dance / like in a trance / teach-ee peach-ee Mel-  
 i-can song / all day long / to his China girl in old Hong Kong.<sup>139</sup>

Over and over again, listeners to early phonographs would have been bombarded with aural imagery that portrayed Asians as inferior to the western world. The song “Hi Lee Hi Lo” describes a group of Chinese who apparently love the German song “Hi Lee Hi Lo” so much that they travel around singing it. This song, recorded in 1923, capitalizes on pidgin English, stating that the Chinese love this song, as they exclaim ““vel-ly vel-ly nice”” and ““me like-ee tune/ me like-ee swing”” when they hear it.<sup>140</sup> In the song, the Chinese are portrayed as ignorant and naïve, playing upon vaudevillian stereotypes.

While vaudeville will be elaborated upon in the next section about Comedy

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<sup>136</sup> Jean Schwartz, “In Blinky, Winky, Chinky, Chinatown,” The Peerless Quartet, Victor 17875, 1915.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Oscar Gardener, “Chinese Blues,” Irving Kaufman, Victor 17919, 1915.

<sup>139</sup> “Chong,” Joseph C. Smith’s Orchestra, Victor 35684, 1919.

<sup>140</sup> Ira Schuster, “Hi Lee Hi Lo,” Eugene West, Victor 19095, 1923.

programming, I will note that vaudeville theatre and phonographic recordings were both popular during the late nineteenth century. The “core of the [ethnic] humor” that was popular in vaudeville programs was the “construction of caricatures based on familiar ethnic stereotypes and linguistic humor” like “puns, malapropisms, double entendres, and accent-play, including broad exaggeration and misunderstandings which result from faulty pronunciation.”<sup>141</sup> Racialized and ethnic characterizations were popular in the theatre and were frequently sonically transferred onto phonographic recordings.

Gendered stereotyping comes into play in early phonographs as well, where Moon argues that the “appearance of Chinese women and musical subjects” was “tied to the reemergence of exoticism and the anxieties surrounding race and gender.”<sup>142</sup> Yellowface stereotyping was often contradictory, and the images surrounding Asian women were no exception. Asian women were depicted as simultaneously submissive and sexually predatory, a kind of threat to the Victorian familial structure. On one end of the spectrum, songs were written to portray Asian women as a kind of China doll/Lotus Blossom. Several examples of the submissive caricature include The Lyric Quartet’s “My Dreamy China Lady” (1916)<sup>143</sup> and Irving Berlin’s “Hurry Back to My Bamboo Shack” (1916).<sup>144</sup> The employment of ultra-feminine yellowface helps to formulate notions of Asian sexuality. The emasculation of Asian men was also a popular stereotype, one that white America readily called upon. In “Chong,” the song follows “little Allee Fo Chong” who “played all day in an Oriental way.” By this, listeners are able to categorize Chong as a

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<sup>141</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” (*Melus*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1996), 20.

<sup>142</sup> Moon, 123.

<sup>143</sup> Egbert Van Alstyne, “My Dreamy China Lady,” The Lyric Quartet, Victor 18034, 1916.

<sup>144</sup> Irving Berlin, “Hurry Back to My Bamboo Shack,” Irving Berlin, Victor 18080, 1916.

little boy and thus, thoroughly un-masculine. This portrayal of Chong, which “may not seem to be malicious on the surface,” becomes especially vicious as the song urges Chong to return to China.<sup>145</sup> In an effort to “make Chong an undesirable man, the songwriter minimizes Chong’s masculinity through descriptions of him as a boy.”<sup>146</sup>

The contradictory nature of gender in regards to Asian men and women highlights the pervasiveness of notions of Yellow Peril and an intense fear of miscegenation. By the 1930’s, Asian women were represented by one of two one-dimensional caricatures, either the Dragon Lady or a China Doll/Lotus Blossom. Both worked to “eroticize Asian women as exotic ‘others’ – sensuous, promiscuous, but untrustworthy,” characterized by an “excess of ‘womanhood’” that facilitated “sexualizing them but also impugning their sexuality.”<sup>147</sup> It is important to note that, despite the “apparent disjunction, both forms [of stereotyping] exist to define, maintain, and justify white male supremacy” underscoring the “interconnections of race, gender, and class” that “do not parallel but intersect and confirm each other, and it is the complicity among these categories of difference that enabled U.S. elites to justify and maintain their cultural, social, and economic power.”<sup>148</sup> On the whole, Asian women as subjects of lyrical stereotyping were interchangeable, a monolithic group of women who frequently had no voice or agency. The songs of this era represent this, as Asian women are often depicted as submissive, generally waiting for their lover to return.

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<sup>145</sup> Judy Tsou, “Gendering Race: Stereotypes of Chinese Americans in Popular Sheet Music,” (*Repercussions* 6, Fall 2001), 35.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 132.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

We can hear yellowface most clearly in comedic recordings of the time. The most obvious example is Cal Stewart's "Uncle Josh Weathersby in a Chinese Laundry" (1901). Stewart, a comedian whose work spanned many different ethnic characterizations, capitalizes on familiar tropes of Chinatown and Asian men throughout the recording. He describes the experience of Uncle Josh, a man from the country visiting New York City for the first time, trying to get his laundry done. His interaction at the laundry, a common trope that represents the Asian man as feminine and therefore un-American, with "one of them pigtailed heathen Chinese" ensued because he could not discern whether "this durned critter can talk English."<sup>149</sup> The laundryman, described as having a pigtail, could imply that the queue (a traditional Chinese hairstyle) "resembles an animal's tail rather than human hair," becoming an "icon of backwardness."<sup>150</sup>

Uncle Josh then proceeds to comically mimic the "outlandish lingo" of this man, which he claims sounded like "cider runnin' out of a jug."<sup>151</sup> Interspersed throughout the recording, Uncle Josh continually mimics the Chinese language in a kind of nonsensical rambling. Even at the turn of the century, Asian men would have been seen as an economic threat and thus barred from traditionally masculine work. Therefore, the available positions for Asian immigrant men, like cooking and laundry, would have been traditionally feminine. This particular stereotype is one of the longest lasting, rooted in the economic realities of the day.

The technological innovation of the phonograph, in many ways, paved the way for radio. The recording of music, songs, and comedy recordings brought vaudevillian

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<sup>149</sup> Cal Stewart, "Uncle Josh Weathersby in a Chinese Laundry," Cal Stewart, Victor 3096, 1901.

<sup>150</sup> Tsou, 50.

<sup>151</sup> Cal Stewart, "Uncle Josh Weathersby in a Chinese Laundry."



stereotypes into the purely aural realm for the first time. As will be discussed, radio played upon the yellowface of the late nineteenth century in a way that widely disseminated stereotypes, with very real social, political, and legal consequences. In 1888, Edison prophetically wrote that the phonograph “will teach us to be careful what we say – for it imparts to us the gift of hearing ourselves as others hear us – exerting thus a decidedly moral influence.”<sup>152</sup> The reality of this sentiment, especially as phonographic recordings evolved into the even more accessible radio programming, becomes particularly important into the twentieth century. While domestic entertainment via the phonograph was popular, it could never have the same impact as radio on the formation of listeners’ national identity. Radio was inherently different from listening to recordings, as consumers of radio created for themselves an imagined community that heard “the same sounds at the same time as millions of others,” radio became a “prime site for the establishment of national identity through national culture.”<sup>153</sup> With radio, we can see how debates of citizenship, gender, race, and ethnicity manifested themselves sonically and on a national scale.

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<sup>152</sup> Thomas A. Edison, “The Perfected Phonograph,” *The North American Review* (Vol. 146, No. 379, June 1888), 650.

<sup>153</sup> John Hartley, “Radiocracy: Sound and Citizenship,” (*International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2000), 156.

## COMEDY PROGRAMS ON THE RADIO

Comedy, as a window “onto the values, hopes, and anxieties of society,” frequently impacted “people’s thoughts and cultural perceptions.”<sup>154</sup> This kind of programming on the radio was widespread during the Golden Age, reshaping popular culture. Comedy programming capitalized on vaudevillian traditions of blackface, yellowface, and other ethnic characterizations that were, for example, anti-Irish or anti-Semitic. By the 1930s, comedy programs became the most popular genre, as shows like *Amos ’n’ Andy* rose steadily in listenership; in fact, *Amos ’n’ Andy* enjoyed thirty years of popularity.<sup>155</sup> This kind of comedic language on the radio played a role in “defining and reinforcing class, ethnic, racial and gender differences” where “malapropisms, wrong pronunciations, overly thick regional accents, and dialects marked the speaker, rightly or wrongly, as ignorant, stupid, and low-class.”<sup>156</sup> As networks consolidated stations, commercial sponsorship became particularly important. Whiteness on the radio was “carefully monitored and enforced” by those parties, who benefited from “radio representations reinforcing customary racial separation.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 101.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>157</sup> Judith E. Smith, “Radio’s ‘Cultural Front,’ 1938-1948” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 211.

Aural yellowface, across various genres of radio programming, is multi-dimensional. Not only is it simply costuming or makeup but it is a “racial joke addressed to white audiences, with Asians and Asian Americans serving as the butt of that joke.”<sup>158</sup> Along with what Kent Ono and Vincent Pham call “explicit yellowface,” yellowface also serves a “psychosocial function,” which allowed radio listeners to “play around with race” and to “imagine what aspects of performance align with an imagined Asianness, while simultaneously attempting to note aspects of the actors’ whiteness” and a “social” function, which hindered “potentially genuine humane social encounter between Asians and Asian Americans and audiences with a shallow one that supports relations of whiteness.”<sup>159</sup> Combined, yellowface becomes a “scrupulously manufactured image dependent on the viewer’s,” or the listener’s in the context of radio, “suspension of disbelief...for long enough to experience the pleasure of a mocking humor.”<sup>160</sup> Thus, it is important to remember that yellowface was constructed by society to maintain white superiority and the continued subordination of Asians in America.

Language is power, and access to the radio was central to this understanding. Popular comedy programming reflected these tensions, as radio moved away from a standard notion of English, finding success in reinvigorating minstrel traditions where performers could highlight the superiority of white America. Because yellowface stereotypes depended on notions of white supremacy, Asian Americans were “conditioned to accept and live in a state of euphemized self-contempt” that is “nothing more than the subject’s acceptance of white standards of beauty, behavior, and

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<sup>158</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 47.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

achievement as being morally absolute.”<sup>161</sup> Asian Americans were continually relegated to these specific yellowface tropes, encouraging a kind of tacit “acknowledgement of the fact that, because he is not white, he can never fully measure up to white standards.”<sup>162</sup> It is easy to want to give comedy programming a pass from this kind of critical examination, but as we will see “humor is one of the most effective and vicious weapons in the repertory of the human mind.”<sup>163</sup> Frequently, ethnic and racial humor was “hostile and aggressive,” even if it is accompanied by a laugh track.<sup>164</sup>

Jokes worked to reflect and reinforce “social attitudes and provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet.”<sup>165</sup> Radio became that outlet for both performers and listeners during the first half of the twentieth century. As we take a closer look into sound as a “critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities” we can better understand how “white supremacy has attempted to suppress, tune out, and willfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers and histories.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love” in *Seeing Through Shuck*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 67.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Joseph Boskin, *Humor and Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, 28 quoted in Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” (*Melus*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1996), 24.

<sup>164</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” (*Melus*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1996), 24.

<sup>165</sup> Charles Winick quoted in Lawrence E. Mintz, “Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” 25.

<sup>166</sup> Stoeber, 4, 6.

### Vaudevillian Blackface on the Radio:

Radio's capacity to bring together key tenets of American culture, such as "technology, advertising, big business, the federal government, mass audiences, home and family," meant it was uniquely successful in the "construction and circulation of representations and narratives – symbolic constructions – that not only served a commercial purpose but spoke directly to and about this new society in the making."<sup>167</sup> Comedy programs conveyed and confirmed to listeners certain cultural characteristics that reinforced the power of white America. Radio, because it transcended visual cues, maintained the status quo of American society by "obsessively rehearsing" and "endlessly circulating and performing structured representations" of racial, ethnic, and gendered distinctions through "language, dialect, and carefully selected aural context."<sup>168</sup> Because of the aural nature of radio, "no other mass medium demanded so much of its audience," who had to be "persuaded to use their imaginations."<sup>169</sup> This creation of imagined communities, who were limited to a purely aural world, necessitated that radio utilize a kind of "creative reductionism"<sup>170</sup> that capitalized on vaudevillian tropes.

Nowhere is this clearer than in one of the first national comedy serials: *Amos 'n' Andy*. Capitalizing on the success of vaudeville in the nineteenth century, which had waned by the 1930s, white radio comedians Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll found national audiences during the Great Depression.<sup>171</sup> This reinvigoration of vaudeville on the radio illustrates "central sites of tension within U.S. culture, as the culturally

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<sup>167</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>169</sup> Alan Having, *Fred Allen's Radio Comedy*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>171</sup> Douglas, 104.

undesirable was projected onto an easily identifiable, culturally devalued minority group.”<sup>172</sup> Blackface programs on the radio, like yellowface, used notions of whiteness (a necessary precursor to being a true American) to reinforce “racial thinking while enumerating and projecting all the undesirable traits associated with nonwhiteness (and therefore non-Americanness) onto an even less powerful – but highly visible – group.”<sup>173</sup> By considering how Gosden and Correll positioned themselves as black, there was certainly no visual cues or other traditional markers of blackface, we can better understand how they relied upon other familiar markers of color: dialect, accents, “ungrammatical and confused English,” and “frequent references to drinking and gambling.”<sup>174</sup> By utilizing these “cultural ‘cues,’ Gosden and Correll reminded their audience that these invisible characters should be regarded as ‘black,’ and also, of course, reinforced the definition of just what this designation meant.”<sup>175</sup>

Historian Susan Douglas understands the immense popularity of serials like *Amos 'n' Andy* as a reflection of a national crisis in masculinity, something that began during the Great Depression but continued throughout the Golden Age of radio.<sup>176</sup> This particular brand of slapstick humor spoke to white, working-class men who utilized a kind of racial ventriloquism where they could put “into the mouth of blacks their sense of helplessness in a world where all too many men suddenly felt superfluous, stymied, throttled.”<sup>177</sup> By playing upon entrenched stereotypes of blacks, the white actors and writers could emphasize white superiority while simultaneously voicing potential fears.

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<sup>172</sup> Hilmes, 21.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Douglas, 105.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

For example, Douglas notes that confusion and fear about Wall Street during the depression were widespread and not solely representative of African Americans. By having Andy voice confusion over the complexity of the stock market, *Amos 'n' Andy* could effectively stereotype “black incomprehension” while simultaneously giving “voice to *white* incomprehension – admittedly safely projected onto blacks – and to the deep resentment white working folks had toward those white elites who may have precipitated, yet remain unscathed by, the current disaster.”<sup>178</sup>

#### Comedy Programming:

While there was certainly no Oriental equivalent to *Amos 'n' Andy*, sonic representations of the Oriental abounded. Variety programs, like *The Fred Allen Show* and *Fibber McGee and Molly* capitalized on the vaudeville traditions and entrenched (although at times less obvious) anti-Asian sentiment. Radio was not simply a reflection of a highly divided society, codified by race. Rather, it was an active player in the ever-changing construction of race. White radio programmers and white listeners used radio to create a distinct American identity, where whiteness was a necessary precursor to citizenship. Radio encouraged these cultural distinctions, an effort that was born from a “need to contain and moderate sites of social tension” in an increasingly “divided and ethnically stratified society.”<sup>179</sup> Therefore, racialized characterizations, especially in comedy programming, had to actively work to avoid any discussion of the various social implications and consequences of this racial divide.

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>179</sup> Hilmes, 23, 29.

Mimicry, a comedy tactic widely utilized in Golden Age radio, is a “strategy that appropriates the Other while simultaneously functioning to emphasize visually” or aurally “who has power in a relationship.”<sup>180</sup> Space for actual Asians on the radio was limited, a key factor in the “pleasure and performative effect of yellowface impersonation” where actual Asian voices would “interrupt the mocking effect and alliances of whiteness and might suggest that those in power cannot exclusively play the [racial] masquerade.”<sup>181</sup> The popularity of radio programming that utilized yellowface suggests that listeners were actually more comfortable with “stereotypes than with the actual people being portrayed.”<sup>182</sup> Ultimately, these yellowface caricatures highlight the fact that:

despite systematically excluding Asians and Asian Americans – from the screen, the stage, and even migration and citizenship – US Americans demonstrated enough interest, curiosity, and intrigue about them to construct a complex representational edifice to include them visually [and aurally] and narratively but to exclude them physically. These representations are thus very important to the way real Asians and Asian Americans were treated and regulated in US society.<sup>183</sup>

In many cases, radio programming where the Oriental interacted with white Americans, ‘humorous’ characterizations were used to highlight the superiority of white America, working to solidify a national identity. Ultimately, it is these comedic interactions with immigrants, Oriental or otherwise, that resonates with listeners. Comedy programming highlighted “‘humorous’ native customs that clashed with American norms, strange dress, exaggerated speech, odd superstitions, misunderstandings in communication,

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<sup>180</sup> Ono and Pham, 49.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*



money troubles,” or “being taken in because of cultural ignorance.”<sup>184</sup> Radio was able to aurally capitalize on these tropes, firmly marking the Oriental as un-American or alien.

One of the most popular Golden Age comedy programs was *The Fred Allen Show*, which debuted in 1939 and remained on the air until 1949.<sup>185</sup> Vaudevillian Fred Allen, who found success on the air beginning in 1932, capitalized on the idea that radio was the “most flexible form in the history of artistic expression” as there “are no limitations of stage or movie set, there are no boundaries of time and space.”<sup>186</sup> Allen intimately understood that fact, frequently taking advantage of the aural nature and lack of visual cues through situational comedy and verbal slapstick. Scholar Alan Having defines verbal slapstick as a

style of comic expression, one that was especially effective on the radio... it relied on the mainstays of traditional American oral humor – language, talk, pronunciation, and dialect... The best of radio’s comic language, including Fred Allen’s, was not restrained, subtle, or understated. Listeners, often engaged in domestic activities, could not easily ignore this broadly farcical comedy that encouraged, even commanded, people momentarily to abandon reality, to revel in the fantastic.<sup>187</sup>

Allen’s variety-comedy shows were fixtures on the airwaves, and in 1935 he introduced the “longest-running continuing character, and Allen’s personal favorite, the Chinese detective One Long Pan.”<sup>188</sup>

One episode from 1948, entitled “One Long Pan with Basil Rathbone,” features a long-form mystery sketch involving a top English barrister, named Norbert Nottingham,

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<sup>184</sup> Hilmes, 89.

<sup>185</sup> Having, *Fred Allen’s Radio Comedy*, 58.

<sup>186</sup> Arch Oboler, “The Art of Radio Writing,” in *Fourteen Radio Plays* (New York: Random House, 1940) quoted in Having, *Fred Allen’s Radio Comedy*, 10.

<sup>187</sup> Having, 130.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

who is to be hung for murder.<sup>189</sup> Nottingham narrates the tale, beginning two months' prior at a tea party for bird lovers at the home of Lady Bensonhurst. He enters the drawing room and interacts with Lady Bensonhurst's houseboy Lo Ping Chung who offers him tea or a "special Oriental martini."<sup>190</sup> Over the course of the evening, Lady Bensonhurst is killed, the police are called, and detective One Long Pan arrives at the scene. He arrives, exclaiming "gweetings" and introducing himself in song and in third-person as a "Chin-ee" detective.<sup>191</sup>

NOTTINGHAM: Will you stop that foul bellowing?

LONG PAN: Whooo are you, Mista Long Nose?

NOTTINGHAM: Norbert Nottingham, Lady Bensonhurst's solicitor.

LONG PAN: Vewy good. Ah, but who is Lady Bensonhurst?

NOTTINGHAM: Lady Bensonhurst is the body, she is there on the chair...

LONG PAN: Long Pan whip into action, solve clime no time.<sup>192</sup>

As the episode continues, Long Pan interviews various guests at the tea party, many of whom were on the lawn looking for a Yellow-bellied Sap Sucker. The detective pledges to solve the mystery, stating:

LONG PAN: Long Pan leave no stone unturned, Long Pan gwill Yellow Kelly Strap Knocker

NOTTINGHAM: The Sap Sucker is a bird, Long Pan, you're just beating around the bush

LONG PAN: Exactly, Confucius say: many man who beat aloud the bush get bird, but not Yellow Kelly Strap Knocker.<sup>193</sup>

Throughout the sketch, Long Pan repeatedly gets the names of characters (and birds) incorrect, calling Nottingham "Bottingham," Lady Bensonhurst "Lady Finsonhuwst," and the White Round Pipets "White Lump Nippits."<sup>194</sup> Long Pan fumbles

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<sup>189</sup> *The Fred Allen Show*, "One Long Pan with Basil Rathbone," 11 April 1948.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

through his interactions with people, often speaking in a kind of pidgin, un-grammatical English. For example, after a lengthy and nonsensical speech, Long Pan asks Nottingham to “ling for Chung,” the houseboy, saying “Long Pan grill to vetty well.”<sup>195</sup>

CHUNG: Did somebody ling for Chung orrr

LONG PAN: Lo Ping! *Indistinguishable Chinese*

CHUNG: *Indistinguishable Chinese*

NOTTINGHAM: I say, do you two know each other?

LONG PAN: Oh, in China confidentially, in China Chung here big counter-fitter.

NOTTINGHAM: Counter-fitter?

LONG PAN: Why you leave, why you leave China, Chung?

CHUNG: Inflation, got to work all year to make a dolla.<sup>196</sup>

The humorous exchanges continue, until Long Pan finally discerns that it was likely Nottingham who committed the murder. He examines the body, “holy smoke!” he exclaims, “on back Lady Bensonhurst head, you see, four lumps!”<sup>197</sup> Long Pan identifies a clock as the murder weapon, deciding he must “allegst” Mr. Nottingham for “murder Lady Benson-Bunsen-Burner,” because “Confucius say, man who commit murder with clock end up doing time.”<sup>198</sup>

Pidgin English is one of the most enduring yellowface stereotypes, spanning different genres of Golden Age radio. In fact, we hear this broken, ungrammatical English in popular culture into the twenty-first century. To better understand that significance of pidgin English in yellowface, we must first consider Asian Americans within the “concept of the dual personality.”<sup>199</sup> Asians in America, who frequently blended aspects of the East and West, were divided into “two incompatible segments,” the first being the “foreigner whose status is dependent on his ability to be accepted by

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> Chin and Chan, 72.

the white natives” and the second being the “handicapped native who is taught that identification with his foreignness is the only way to justify his difference in skin color.”<sup>200</sup> This notion of a dual personality denies Asian Americans, or in this instance Chinese Americans

authority over language and thus a means of codifying, communicating, and legitimatizing his experience. Because he is a foreigner, English is not his native tongue. Because he was born in the US, Chinese is not his native tongue. Chinese from China, “real Chinese,” make the Chinese-American aware of his lack of authority over Chinese, and the white American doesn’t recognize the Chinese-American’s brand of English as a language, even a minority language, but as faulty English, an “accent.”<sup>201</sup>

Through this denial of the ability to develop an authentic language, white America has ultimately denied any authentic development of culture. By suppressing genuine Asian American culture through yellowface stereotypes, white America effectively “subjugates him by forcing him to define himself in terms he knows are not his.”<sup>202</sup> Pidgin English becomes a simple way to do just that.

Fred Allen brought his beloved character on many different radio programs, including *Texaco Star Theatre*. This particular radio program followed a similar format to the *Fred Allen Show*; in fact, *Texaco Star Theatre* was on the air from 1940 to 1944, during a *Fred Allen Show* hiatus from 1940 to 1945.<sup>203</sup> In an episode from 3 January 1943, One Long Pan competes with Peter Lorre’s mysterious Mr. Moto (a caricature that will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter on Crime-Fighting Melodramas) for the title of the “World’s Greatest Oriental Detective.”<sup>204</sup> In “The

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>203</sup> Having, 58.

<sup>204</sup> *Texaco Star Theatre*, “The Missing Shot,” 3 January 1943

Missing Shot,” Mr. Moto and One Long Pan are called to the scene of a murder. Once again, Long Pan introduces himself in song and in the third person. Both detectives arrive at the scene of the crime:

LONG PAN: You, little man with sneaky face, who are you?

MOTO: Oh so, if you are detective, you tell me who I am.

LONG PAN: Oh ho ho, don’t make monkey business. I am detective One Long Pan!

MOTO: You are One Big Joke!

LONG PAN: Long Pan may be one big joke. You one little punk. Now who are you, come clean!

MOTO: I am Mr. Moto.

LONG PAN: Oh ho, Mr. Moto in person! Mr. Moto Oriental nudnick!<sup>205</sup>

Peter Lorre’s yellowface caricature seems almost muted in contrast to Fred Allen’s One Long Pan. Long Pan is not particularly clever, especially when solving a crime alongside the skilled Mr. Moto. He is quick to “allect” people, ignoring evidence right in front of his face.<sup>206</sup> In many ways, this relationship between Mr. Moto and One Long Pan is heavily gendered, more than simply racialized. Mr. Moto is soft-spoken, consistently overpowered by the boisterous bumbling One Long Pan. In this, Mr. Moto embodies the model minority stereotype, typical for the detective motif, while Long Pan is the “gook,” a comedic exaggeration of yellowface tropes.

One Long Pan also manages to meet Charlie Chan on *Texaco Star Theatre* in the 1941 episode “One Long Pan Takes a Chance.”<sup>207</sup> We meet Charlie Chan at the premier of his new movie. Reporters are on the scene, interviewing the various stars. Chan takes the microphone, saying “Charlie Chan velly glad, say hello, velly glad finish one hundred

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore further, it should be noted here that Long Pan is using the Yiddish word nudnick, highlighting a potentially interesting avenue for future scholarship regarding sonic yellowface and anti-Semitic representations.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Texaco Star Theatre*, “One Long Pan Takes a Chance,” 02 January 1941.

picture, velly glad.”<sup>208</sup> In the course of the interview, he is shot and killed, his last words: “oh! Charlie shot. Hey, Confucius clap hands, here come Charlie!”<sup>209</sup> One Long Pan is immediately called to the scene, where someone asks “say, who is this, Dennis Day with jaundice?” and another calls out “this is not only a chinaman, but he’s crazy!”<sup>210</sup> Long Pan does not register these insults, instead calling himself a “Chin-ee Superman.”<sup>211</sup> Once again, we find Long Pan on a silly quest to find the murderer; at one point, he exclaims “you see what Long Pan find? A lewoloweh!”<sup>212</sup> Of course, the “lewoloweh” is a revolver. While a more nuanced discussion of an Oriental detective will take place in the next chapter, I will make note that One Long Pan is a caricature of a caricature. In this particular episode, he is not the foil of Mr. Moto but an exaggerated example of the model minority trope, full of pithy lines about Confucius and little else. His frequent allusions to Confucius marks One Long Pan, and presumably all Asians in America, as alien and ultimately unassimilable. One Long Pan will never be able to shed his Asian roots and assimilate into an Anglo-Saxon nation. By marking Asian Americans as aliens, radio programs were able to clearly define an American national identity.

Another popular sketch comedy program, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, “took full advantage of radio’s strength as a sound medium.”<sup>213</sup> Jim and Marian Jordan, a husband and wife vaudevillian team, found success on the radio in the mid-1930s. The program had a recurring character named Gooey Fooey (voiced by Harold Peary), a laundryman

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Radio Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 110.

who was featured on the show in the 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>214</sup> In the 1938 episode “Getting the Laundry Done,” Fibber McGee has run out of clean clothes, and naturally needs to find someone to do the washing.<sup>215</sup> He comes across a Chinese laundryman, calling out “oh hello there chinaboy, you belong-ee wash-ee wash-ee come by this place topside.” Gooey Fooey responds, “ah sure, you want-ee wash-ee britch-ee.”<sup>216</sup>

The conversation that ensues is so full of malapropisms, intentional pidgin English, and indistinguishable ‘Chinese’ that it is almost too difficult to follow. In the 1939 episode “Missing Shirt Collar Button,” Fibber McGee heads to the laundry to pick up his silk shirt.<sup>217</sup> He begins to explain to Gooey Fooey what he wants, opting halfway through to use pidgin English, adding unnecessary “ee” sounds to the end of each word. Like One Long Pan, Gooey Fooey cannot manage to get names correct, even when he hears just hears them. As the sketch continues, we hear a string of unintelligible ‘Chinese’ as Fibber McGee sees his silk shirt being destroyed. He calls out and Gooey Fooey responds: “uh huh velly sorry, you no get-ee shirt-ee back. Serious mistake to bring Japanese shirt to Chinese laundry!”<sup>218</sup>

Asian and Asian American men on the radio were consistently relegated to menial jobs like laundryman or cook, considered to be undesirable careers by their white counterparts, who may have felt the positions were too feminine. Even when the Oriental was in a position of authority, for example as the lead detective, white characters were regularly undermining their authority. Having solved the case, detectives like Charlie

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<sup>214</sup> David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147.

<sup>215</sup> *Fibber McGee and Molly*, “Getting the Laundry Done,” 10 January 1938.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Fibber McGee and Molly*, “Missing Shirt Collar Button,” 24 January 1939.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

Chan or One Long Pan generally attribute their success to something else, be it via Confucius or a mystical (alien) ability. Radio's capacity to remove visible markers of race does not actually mean that it is encouraging assimilation or a kind of color blindness. Rather, radio had to make blatant aural connections to racialized stereotyping in an effort to maintain the status quo.

*Gasoline Alley*, originally a newspaper comic strip, was adapted into a radio sitcom on NBC in the 1940s. The series follows the mechanic Skee-zix Wallet, part owner of Wallet and Bobble Garage, and several of his friends.<sup>219</sup> A regular on the program was a philosophical Chinese waiter named Ling Wee, voiced by Junius Matthews. By painting Ling Wee in a nonthreatening light, *Gasoline Alley* avoids the Yellow Peril motif. Instead, the program goes through great pains to ensure that Ling Wee is still marked as alien, so as to guarantee the place of Skee-zix and his girlfriend Nina.

In the surprisingly progressive 1948 episode of *Gasoline Alley*, "The Adventure of The Rat Race with Rice," Skee-zix and his coworker Wilmer Bobble entertain local Chinese restaurateur Ching Fu Lee, hoping to get his business.<sup>220</sup> Wilmer decides to cook dinner for Fu Lee, opting to cook him rice, paying homage to his Chinese heritage. Disaster ensues and eventually the kitchen catches on fire. Ching Fu Lee arrives in the middle of the commotion; Wilmer runs to the door to meet him, saying through his thick country accent that he's been "practicin my pidgin English so I can greet Ching Fu."<sup>221</sup> Ching Fu begins speaking, but is interrupted by Wilmer:

WILMER: Gleetings my vewy good fwend, only say-me Ching Fu

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<sup>219</sup> "Gasoline Alley" in Vincent Terrace, *Radio Programs, 1924-1984: A Catalog of More than 1800 Shows*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 127.

<sup>220</sup> *Gasoline Alley*, "The Adventure of the Rat Race with Rice," Written by Kane Campbell, NBC Blue Network, 22 October 1948.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*



CHING FU: Hmm, what's –

WILMER: Only say-me like Chinese talk. You understand only say-me yes

CHING FU: Oh, oh yeah. Only say-me yes. You speak-a very fine China talk

WILMER: Did you have any trouble, I mean twouble finding louse, I mean house

CHING FU: Oh no, oh no twouble.<sup>222</sup>

The firemen are called and Skeezix, Wilmer, and Ching Fu assess the damage after the they leave. Wilmer alternates his speech pattern, shifting between his southern accent and his 'Chinese' persona. Naturally, this confuses Skeezix, who asks Wilmer why he is speaking that way. Ching Fu answers, "Mr. Bumble make velly good China talk for friend Ching Fu."<sup>223</sup> The food is ruined, so Wilmer suggests going to Ching Fu's "velly good lestaurent for dinner."<sup>224</sup> Ching Fu responds:

CHING FU: oh velly velly sorry Mr. Bumble, today China holiday, all chefs go home, nothing at lestaurent but flied lice.

WILMER: flied lice?!

CHING FU: *speaking with a distinctly American accent* I mean, fried rice. You understand, don't you?

WILMER: Hey wait a minute, what happened to your Chinese accent?

CHING FU: Chinese accent? Oh, I was doing that for you Mr. Bobble, I thought you wanted to play. As a matter of fact, my family has been in this country for about a hundred years. I took my PhD at Harvard.<sup>225</sup>

This sketch has several important components. The first, and most obvious, is Wilmer's ignorant assumption the Ching Fu could not understand his English unless he used a form of pidgin English. This speaks to the widespread nature of traditional yellowface stereotypes. What is interesting here is the shift from the comedic representation of Ching Fu as an alien force, a man for whom Wilmer must go out of his way to accommodate by cooking rice and speaking "China talk," to a model minority.

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<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

Ultimately, we find out that he is a successful business man, who enjoys the simple American meal of ham and eggs, and got his doctorate at Harvard.

The episode was released in 1948; in the aftermath of World War II, the Yellow Peril myth had begun to unravel, where the “treatment of Asian American ethnic groups brought into sharp focus the contradiction between their exclusions as racial subjects and the promise of their assimilation as ethnic citizens.”<sup>226</sup> Ching Fu functions as a symbol of that understanding, of the “successful transformation of the Oriental from the exotic to the acceptable” as a “narrative of Americanization... through which American’s anxieties about communism, race mixing, and transgressive sexuality might be contained and eventually tamed.”<sup>227</sup> Ching Fu’s character was emblematic of the shifting notions of yellowface, representing an early example of the model minority myth.

### Conclusion:

Through comedy programming on the radio, we can most clearly see what scholars Kent Ono and Vincent Pham call “ignorance of particularity” or the “insensitivity toward the differences among Asian American groups and lack of awareness of particularities.”<sup>228</sup> By understanding how radio reflected this crucial notion, we can better understand its relationship to the “production and reproduction of race, racism, and racial discourses.”<sup>229</sup> The interchangeability of Oriental representations, frequently across cultural, racial, national, and ethnic lines points to the implicit

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<sup>226</sup> Robert G Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 146.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> Ono and Pham, 7.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding that all Asians are members of a homogeneous and unchanging group. This ultimately encouraged radio listeners to view Asians as “inhuman,” while also “facilitat[ing] the reproduction of institutional and structural processes of disempowerment and disenfranchisement, which include the continuation of Orientalization and the foreignization of Asians and Asian Americans.”<sup>230</sup>

The next chapter, which focuses on melodramas on the radio, will explore one motif introduced in this chapter – the Oriental detective. Both Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto represent early prototypes of the model minority stereotype while their counterpart, Fu Manchu, embodies Yellow Peril at the opposite end of the spectrum. We will continue to hear vaudevillian techniques, like the pidgin English, utilized under more serious circumstances. While yellowface in radio melodramas is certainly humorous to our modern ear, it is imperative to understand how these caricatures were utilized in an effort to continue the subordination of Asians in America.

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<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

## CRIME-FIGHTING MELODRAMAS ON THE RADIO

Radio was a “conflicting, tension-ridden site of the ruthless exercise of cultural hegemony.”<sup>231</sup> This becomes especially obvious when one looks more closely at the various American crime and detective melodrama serials of the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike the comedy programs discussed in the previous chapter, radio melodramas explored very real themes, like citizenship and nationality, through yellowface. This period in American history was particularly insecure and radio grew out of this specific social condition, wherein the “crisis in national identity” was coupled with various “shifts in relations of power and social distinctions, particularly around race, gender and ethnicity.”<sup>232</sup> Because of radio’s unique capacity to sonically reinforce cultural hegemony and power on a national scale, it functioned as a way to “relieve, repress, or otherwise manage cultural anxieties” as it “reinforce[ed] an existing status quo by presenting those anxieties and then resolving them through the narrative.”<sup>233</sup>

Crime-fighting melodramas offered listeners a certain degree of escapism, but were shaped by the circumstances of the day. In many of these programs, yellowface tropes were easily called upon: Chinatown as a seedy place of crime, mythical and alien

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<sup>231</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvii.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>233</sup> Alexander Russo, “A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 260.

powers, maniacal villains, and soft effeminate detectives. Nowhere is the relationship between popular culture, race, and gender more clear than in these melodramas, which highlight how national identities were formed and mobilized through yellowface stereotyping. In these programs, contemporary listeners can truly hear the pervasive power of sonic intolerance through sonic othering.

### Oriental Detectives:

As we have seen earlier in this thesis, Oriental detectives prove to be a widely popular yellowface stereotype on the airwaves. While Fred Allen's *One Long Pan* offered listeners a comedic and exaggerated version of the Oriental detective, both Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto presented to listeners an early version of the model minority stereotype. These detectives were portrayed as heroes, making yellowface particularly significant as a strategy to "mitigate the threat" of an Oriental presence.<sup>234</sup> The white men who voiced Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto created a "potent vehicle for a socially transgressive experience (to inhabit the identity of another ethnicity) while, simultaneously, limiting that experience through the recognition of that same actor as also conceivable (if not always definitively) Caucasian."<sup>235</sup> Yellowface portrayals of Oriental detectives allowed listeners to distinguish between detectives like Sherlock Holmes, whose abilities were attributed to his immense intellect, and Oriental detectives, whose abilities were racialized and attributed to mystical powers or ancient wisdom. As will be discussed in this chapter, Oriental detectives, a yellowface archetype that was carefully constructed by

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<sup>234</sup> Karla Rae Fuller, "Masters of the Macabre: The Oriental Detective," *Spectator* (Vol. 17, No. 1, Fall/Winter 1996), 56.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

white America, are powerful examples of how both “admirable and adverse elements reconfigure to mitigate the threat of even a heroic Asian character.”<sup>236</sup>

Charlie Chan, as one of the most prominent yellowface caricatures, represents one of the more significant archetypes: the Oriental detective. We have seen this trope before in comedic form with Fred Allen’s Chinese detective One Long Pan. Charlie Chan, along with Mr. Moto, were popular figures on the radio, in film, on television, and in literary works. It is “precisely the unusual phenomenon of the Oriental character inhabiting an officially sanctioned position of authority in law enforcement that distinguishes” this stereotype from others.<sup>237</sup> The various special abilities of the Oriental detective derive from his race, allowing the caricature to function differently than other detectives in popular culture. Oftentimes, this detective archetype is a singular figure, operating in a kind of cultural isolation. In this, “qualities such as close observation, resourcefulness, tenacity, and mastery that the Oriental detective characteristically embodies are commonly ascribed to their non-Western racial and cultural heritage,” operating as “part of a specifically cultural way of being” distinct from other “western officials who have requested [their] help to solve the case.”<sup>238</sup> In its most basic sense, this mystical knowledge works to define these detectives as alien, firmly establishing their place as the other in popular culture.

*The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, a radio program that had many incarnations across all four networks, was popular from 1932 until 1948. In the “Man Who Moved Mountains,” Ed Begley, Sr as Charlie Chan combined the “wisdom of the East with the

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<sup>236</sup> Karla Rae Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental: Caucasian Performance in American Film*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 72.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Science of the West” through his top-notch detective work.<sup>239</sup> This episode, like so many other programs, begins with a gong. The announcer introduces the “incomparable Charlie Chan” as a “detective, philosopher,” and a “modern day Chinese sage,” setting the stage for a new chapter in Chan’s adventure.<sup>240</sup> The traditional Oriental music plays, invoking images of the far east. Chan’s soft voice welcomes listeners and, in broken English, begins the episode with philosophical wisdom: “it is widely written that man who wishes something for nothing invariably receives nothing.”<sup>241</sup> As we follow Chan on his adventure, hearing many more pithy words of wisdom like “man who jumps to conclusion, lands in ignorance.”<sup>242</sup>

Charlie Chan is hopelessly polite, unassuming, nonthreatening, and thoroughly Americanized. In fact, he is the closest we get to an assimilated Asian American, because he is, in fact, an invention of white America. Despite his assimilation, Charlie Chan embodied for listeners a heavily codified racial order. Throughout the series, Charlie Chan curiously refers to his various body parts in third person, making comments like “these ancient eyes” or “these imperfect ears perceive strange noise” or “these ancient nostrils perceive truth of daughter’s statement.”<sup>243</sup> These frequent references to his body allows listeners to imagine Chan and functions as a way for the program to establish control over that image.

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<sup>239</sup> *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, “Man Who Moved Mountains,” ABC Network, 19 July 1945.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, “The Case of the Talking Doll,” ABC Network, 25 August 1947.

Charlie Chan, as an early prototype of the model minority stereotype, does not “challenge the dominant social order and who is submissive, obedient, sexually non-threatening, intelligent, competent, and dependable, thereby providing a decorative and exotic flavor for monocultural dominant white US society.”<sup>244</sup> Unlike Fu Manchu, the epitome of Yellow Peril, Charlie Chan is “dedicated to the United States and to its people.”<sup>245</sup> Interestingly enough, despite the fact that Chan is the father of ten kids, which he calls “Number One Son” or “Number Four Daughter,”<sup>246</sup> he is an “emasculated breeder” who is “stoic, submissive, and lacking sexual potency and agency.”<sup>247</sup> Charlie Chan does not represent a distinct threat to American masculinity and the American family, likely contributing to his immense popularity. And while he is, in many ways, fully assimilated, his use of pidgin English does not improve over time. This serves to “mark him indelibly as unassimilable.”<sup>248</sup> Both Charlie Chan and his Japanese counterpart Mr. Moto serve as a “representative of a particular social and class position, that of the social servant, a ‘detective-sergeant,’ someone successful even as he is disempowered.”<sup>249</sup>

In an attempt to neutralize the threat of an Oriental male in a position of power, radio programmers and the Caucasian actors that portrayed Mr. Moto and Charlie Chan used voice to sonically emasculate the detectives. Both of their voices are high-pitched, softer than the booming voices of the white males that surround them. Radio facilitated

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<sup>244</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 82.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *The Adventures of Charlie Chan*, “The Case of the Talking Doll.”

<sup>247</sup> Ono and Pham, 82.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*



the creation of what Christine Ehrick calls a “gendered soundscape,” which works to “help us conceptualize sound and voice as a place where categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are constituted, and by extension the ways that power, inequality, and agency might be expressed via sound.”<sup>250</sup> Gender and race, social constructs that white America capitalized upon on the radio, work together to highlight the inferiority and unassimilable nature of Asians in America. The soft-spoken nature of Mr. Moto and Charlie Chan reflect a concerted effort to differentiate Asian men from their white counterparts. These are intentional, stylistic sonic decisions made to ensure that these Oriental detectives were emasculated on the airwaves.

Mr. Moto, a Japanese American detective who we previously encountered in the *Texaco Star Theatre* radio program, is yet another example of the Oriental detective. The short-lived *Mr. I.A. Moto* came on the air in 1951 on NBC, adapted from the *Mr. Moto* film series. Unlike the character of Charlie Chan, who is a highly sought after police detective, Mr. Moto is a secret operative who operates undercover in the shadows. Mr. Moto is the “international agent extraordinary,” the “inscrutable, crafty, and courageous little Oriental”<sup>251</sup> with the “straightforwardness of his American heritage and with the subtlety of his Oriental ancestry.”<sup>252</sup>

Scholars of Asian American popular culture generally note that the popularity of the Mr. Moto brand, who had various print and movie deals, waned during the Second World War. While the popularity of Charlie Chan continued through the War, Mr.

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<sup>250</sup> Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay 1930-1950*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>251</sup> *Mr. I.A. Moto*, “The Dead Land,” Written and Directed by Harry W. Junkin, NBC Network, 17 June 1951.

<sup>252</sup> *Mr. I.A. Moto*, “The Smoke Screen,” Written and Directed by Harry W. Junkin, NBC Network, 3 June 1951.

Moto's Japanese ancestry was enough to change the course of the popular detective series. During World War II, the Japanese embodied yellowface stereotypes in many ways, most significantly in the "racial jealousy that the Japanese had caught the American navy unprepared, a fear that the Japanese would lust after the American controlled Pacific empire, and a belief that the Japanese, because of their sneak attack on Pearl [Harbor], were bloodthirsty killers, schemers and world conquerors."<sup>253</sup> Therefore, *Mr. I.A. Moto*, a short-lived radio program that lasted for 23 episodes in 1951, came on the air during the end of the Golden Age. It seems it was a last ditch attempt to reinvigorate the popularity that Mr. Moto enjoyed in the 1930s as well as a possible chance to rehabilitate the image of Japanese Americans. Throughout the series, Mr. Moto's primary target was simple and reflected Cold War mentality perfectly. The radio program premiered in 1951, a time when Japan was once again a US ally. Yellow Peril fears often reflected US foreign policy, meaning they had to be reformulated to fit the Cold War rhetoric that had begun at the end of World War II.

The first episode of the series, "A Force Called X07" follows Mr. Moto as he foils a communist plot to detonate an atomic weapon in New York City.<sup>254</sup> As listeners first hear Mr. Moto, they detect only the faintest hint of an accent, and would likely have not been able to discern his race without the help of the announcer (who identified Mr. Moto as Japanese). Throughout the episode, we can pick up on his race. While he never makes explicit references to Confucius – he is Japanese after all – Mr. Moto makes

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<sup>253</sup> Gary Hoppenstand "Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of the Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment" in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. C.D. Geist and J. Nachbar (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1983), 288.

<sup>254</sup> *Mr. I.A. Moto*, "A Force Called X07," Written and Directed by Harry W. Junkin, NBC Network, 20 May 1951.

philosophical observances like: “who is there can make muddy water clear, but if left alone it will become clear of itself.”<sup>255</sup>

In the third episode of the series, “The Smoke Screen,” Mr. Moto investigates a group of Chinese who smuggled mass amounts of opium into Manhattan. Because of Mr. Moto’s connections with a man from Tokyo who “feels he owes [Moto] a debt” because Moto’s “house once served his house with great honor and sacrifice,” Moto is tipped off about the shipment.<sup>256</sup> Mr. Moto is sure that the shipment of opium is “a tentacle of a communist octopus” working to “devour the blood of America’s men and women” and “lower the birth rate.”<sup>257</sup> Mr. Moto is explicitly blaming Chinese communists for this disaster, combining years of entrenched yellowface tropes with new Cold War fears of the spread of communism. This is a complete reversal of wartime yellowface, where the Japanese embodied Yellow Peril for many American listeners. The cases investigated by Mr. Moto intentionally pinpoint communism as the cause of crimes, which places the Chinese back at the center of Yellow Peril fears.

#### “Good” Orientals versus “Bad” Orientals:

This particular genre of radio allows for a fruitful exploration into the connections between Yellow Peril stereotypes and the model minority myth, which is more of a circular relationship rather than polar opposites. Depending on US foreign policy, the favored position for Asians in America vacillated between China and Japan, where each group represented a “good” Oriental or a “bad” Oriental depending on various things like

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<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Mr. I.A. Moto*, “The Smoke Screen.”

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

wars or alliances. During the exclusionary era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Chinese Americans were targeted as the embodiment of Yellow Peril while the Japanese were considered less of a threat. At the onset of World War II, this view shifted. China became a US ally while the attacks on Pearl Harbor actualized Yellow Peril for many Americans. With Pearl Harbor, and the subsequent internment of thousands of Japanese Americans, the US government became deeply invested in delineating between a good Oriental and a bad Oriental. During the Cold War, this shifted again as the Chinese became more closely associated with communism and the Japanese became US allies once again.

Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu are the best representations of what Americans considered a good and bad Oriental, respectively. Gender comes into play as well, where Fu Manchu embodied the yellowface caricature of the Dragon Lady while Charlie Chan embodied the China Doll/Lotus Blossom trope. This will be discussed in detail a bit later. Of course, yellowface stereotypes are never staunchly positive or negative, rather it is better to view them as two sides of the same coin. In this, we can see how:

Fu Manchu/dragon lady and Charlie Chan/lotus blossom, like their dual genders, were the offspring of a miscegenational [*sic*] union: the inter-breeding of Asian and European culture, making them doubly dangerous. Both Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan were steeped in Orientalism but learned from the West, and they challenged and threatened white supremacy, and galvanized and attested to the superiority of Europe. They operated from within the white homeland, within the colonial enclaves of Chinatowns and Hawaii, and hated and envied the West. In the end, Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, Yellow Peril and model minority, personified the cunning, sensuality, and mysticism of a feminine Asia (the body) and the intellect, logic, and science of a masculine Europe (the mind).<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), 145.

Wherever the pendulum falls, white performers and listeners in the early twentieth century could maintain their hegemony, justifying their supremacy “through feminization in one direction and repression in the other.”<sup>259</sup>

Charlie Chan and the villainous Fu Manchu, from the program *The Shadow of Fu Manchu*, represent two different extremes of the yellowface spectrum: Chan is effeminate, good-natured, and subservient while Fu Manchu is evil and hyper-masculine. Both ends of this spectrum operate as the “precondition for their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American society.”<sup>260</sup> It would be difficult to discuss the spectrum without taking into account gender. Yen Le Espiritu notes that Yellow Peril works to simultaneously depict Asians in America as both “masculine and feminine but also as neither masculine nor feminine.”<sup>261</sup> Asian American men were intentionally represented as queer personages, distinctly different from white American men. Espiritu elaborates:

On the one hand, as part of the Yellow Peril, Asian American men and women have been depicted as a *masculine* threat that needs to be contained. On the other hand, both sexes have been skewed toward the female side: an indication of the group’s marginalization in US society... Although an apparent disjunction, both the feminization and masculinization of Asian men and women exist to define and confirm the white man’s superiority.<sup>262</sup>

Both Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu are particularly fruitful characters when discussing gendered notions of yellowface. Fu Manchu is a sinister, brilliant, and powerful man

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>260</sup> Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of Representation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5 quoted in Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 12.

<sup>261</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 129.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

whose story follows his attempts to take over the world and destroy western civilization. Espiritu argues that Fu Manchu works to “threaten and offend white masculinity” emphasizing the idea that it needs “to be contained ideologically and destroyed physically.”<sup>263</sup> Charlie Chan, on the other hand, is depicted as nonthreatening, subservient, and effeminate. As we discussed above, Charlie Chan’s voice is soft and high-pitched, representing a feminized Oriental male. Fu Manchu’s voice, on the other hand, is deep, hyper-masculine, forceful, and brash. His voice is overly masculine, invoking Yellow Peril fears for the listener through voice alone.

The kind of cultural and racial oppression of Asian American men on the airwaves is easily achieved when the central character (in this instance Charlie Chan) is emasculated. Characterizations of Oriental men on the airwaves as either hyper-sexual or asexual lends credence to the notion that “race and gender relations do not parallel but intersect and confirm each other, and it is the complicity among these categories of difference that enables US elites to justify and maintain their cultural, social, and economic power.”<sup>264</sup> These hugely important representations of yellowface in American popular culture work to emphasize the one-dimensional nature of Oriental stereotypes. We see this binary repeated again and again, radio hosts calling upon these ingrained conceptions with ease.

*The Shadow of Fu Manchu* was an immensely popular radio program that began in the 1930s. In fact, the program was a global phenomenon. Radio Luxembourg, a pirate radio station outside of England, published an advertisement in the 1930s entitled “S-S-SH! Dr. Fu Manchu is on the Air!” It began like this: “WARNING! Dr. Fu Manchu,

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

arch-demon of the Orient is slinking through the shadows of the underworld.”<sup>265</sup> Fu Manchu captured the world’s attention, bring an aural component to the Yellow Peril in a completely unprecedented way. Fu Manchu stories, adapted from Sax Rohmer’s novels, began playing in 1927 on *The Collier Hour*. From 1939 through 1940 *The Shadow of Fu Manchu* came on the air on the Mutual Broadcasting Network. The first episode of the series, “Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,” came on the air on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1939.<sup>266</sup> The sound of the gong brings the listener into right mindset, the announcer sets the stage describing the “heavy shroud of dense yellow fog” that surrounded the ancient home of Dr. Fu Manchu.<sup>267</sup>

The Doctor, wrapped in a “heavy yellow silk gown” and surrounded by tapestries of golden dragons, Chinese ruins, and curious “instruments unknown to western science,” Fu Manchu “thoughtfully studied through long narrowed eyes in the glow of the green light.”<sup>268</sup> Described as a beautiful Eurasian girl, Karamaneh stands next to the Doctor. Later in the series, we discover that she was sold as a slave to Fu Manchu when she was just a child. In this episode, Karamaneh embodies the China Doll/Lotus Blossom yellowface trope as she is quiet and reserved, speaking only when asked a question. Each character has a thick accent, their syntax nonsensical. Dr. Petrie, a white doctor who is investigating the use of venom to kill victims, claims that he must find out who is committing these crimes in the “interest of the entire white race” whose “survival depends on the success of [his] mission.”<sup>269</sup> At the end of each episode, the Fu Manchu’s

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<sup>265</sup> “S-S-SH! Dr. Fu Manchu is on the Air!” in *The Rohmer Review* (No. 11, Dec. 1973), 9.

<sup>266</sup> *The Shadow of Dr. Fu Manchu*, “Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,” MBC Network, 8 May 1939.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

Yellow Peril is “contained, in spite of the exaggerated threat posed by the scheming Chinese man.”<sup>270</sup> The construct of “white male supremacy” ensured the continual vilification of Oriental men to “maintain a sense of superiority among white men.”<sup>271</sup> Dr. Fu Manchu became the model for Oriental villains on the radio, which we see in the next chapter with Ming the Merciless, and in subsequent movies and television shows.

### Conclusion:

At the onset of World War II, we can most clearly see how Charlie Chan as a “good” Oriental who embodies the model minority trope and Fu Manchu as a “bad” Oriental who represents Yellow Peril, “became inscribed on Chinese and Japanese nationalities respectively.”<sup>272</sup> Representations of the Oriental in popular culture were explicitly related to US foreign policy. Certain entrenched characteristics of Asians in general are readily applied to specific racial groups under the Oriental umbrella. During the era of Chinese exclusion, Yellow Peril fears were synonymous with the Chinese. With Pearl Harbor, Yellow Peril was reconstructed and reoriented to the Japanese.

It should be reiterated that Yellow Peril had, for many years, no basis in reality. Chinese immigrants to American never posed any real threat to white American workers and their families. Even after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when, for the first time, an Asian country had posed a legitimate threat to the United States, many Japanese

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<sup>270</sup> Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 28 quoted in Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 35.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> Keith Aoki, “‘Foreignness’ and Asian American Identities: Yellowface, World War II Propaganda, and Bifurcated Racial Stereotypes,” *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* (Vol. 4, No. 1, 1996), 39.



Americans were targeted. By constructing the Japanese, including legal Japanese citizens in America and Americans of Japanese descent, as racialized enemies, America was able to rationalize the internment of more than 120,000 US residents.<sup>273</sup> Despite the fact that no Japanese American was “found guilty of treason, espionage, or spying,”<sup>274</sup> deeply ingrained Yellow Peril fears allowed the US to “whip itself into a war fever quickly” as the “barriers between the stereotype and prejudice and discrimination were soon torn down.”<sup>275</sup>

We have very few sources that note how Asian Americans were “historically involved in externalizing images of themselves and other Asians,” meaning that “primary externalizations” in things like “public images, discourse, language, and signs” were thus “created by non-Asian Americans, few of whom had any useful knowledge of Asians.”<sup>276</sup> Yellow Peril fears, frequently perpetuated on the radio and in other mass media, had very real consequences for Asians in America, from various exclusionary legislation introduced in the late nineteenth century to the internment of tens of thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II. In the next chapter, we will discuss radio programming adapted from comic books. Radio brought a sonic dimension to adventure stories and superhero exploits for listeners of all ages and were especially popular with children. Like crime-fighting melodramas, these programs reflected themes of Yellow Peril and were forever changed by World War II. This chapter will also more thoroughly discuss one of the most enduring tropes of yellowface: The Dragon Lady. Introduced by

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<sup>273</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> Hoppenstand, 288.

<sup>276</sup> Ono and Pham, 42.

the comic book and sonically embodied in the subsequent radio serial *Terry and the Pirates*, Yellow Peril was feminized for the first time.

## ADVENTURE AND SUPERHERO PROGRAMS

The legacy of Golden Age radio, whose “sonic traces have retroactively become some of the most potent aesthetic renderings of racial segregation, gender inequality, and heteronormativity,” have become an apt metaphor for America during the first half of the twentieth century: a “time when whiteness aligned perfectly with ‘American citizen,’ domestic gender roles remained clear and unassailable, ‘family values’ went unquestioned, and national unity and patriotism for the ‘good war’ never flagged.”<sup>277</sup> Yellowface on the radio reflected the course of American history, where the circular and conflicting notions of a Yellow Peril and the model minority frequently converged in an effort to reflect the course of history.

A significant component of listenership to radio programming during the Golden Age were children. Programming specifically for children, a lucrative commercial base, overtook the airwaves after school from 5:00pm to 6:00pm (a prime timeslot known as the “children’s hour”) and on Saturday mornings.<sup>278</sup> Adventure serials and superhero programs, both of which were frequently adapted from comic books, were immensely popular across the country. By providing both children and adults a degree of escapism from their daily lives, radio programming like *The Green Hornet* and *Terry and the Pirates* found particular success by capitalizing on the popularity of yellowface

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<sup>277</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race & The Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 232.

<sup>278</sup> *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*, ed. by Ray B. Brown and Pat Brown, (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 167.

stereotyping to convey humor, to establish setting, to create vile and despicable villains, and to explain otherworldly abilities.

### Adventure Serials:

The perpetuation of yellowface tropes on radio programming suited for children speaks to the widespread acceptance and palatability of even the vilest sonic representations of the Oriental. One of the more popular adventure serials adapted from a comic book, *Terry and the Pirates*, aired five times a week in the 1940s.<sup>279</sup> The program, which followed Terry on his various adventures in the Orient, offers contemporary listeners insight into the aural creation and perpetuation of one of the most indelible yellowface tropes: The Dragon Lady. The term originated in 1934 in Milton Caniff's comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*, and was embodied sonically when the strip was adapted into a radio program in 1937. Of his Dragon Lady, Caniff wrote, she "combines all the best features of past mustache twirlers," referencing Fu Manchu, "with the lure of the handsome wench."<sup>280</sup> The comic strip, and its subsequent radio program, forever etched into the American popular memory the image of the Dragon Lady, feminizing Yellow Peril for the first time and complicating the image of the Asian woman as a China Doll/Lotus Blossom.

Because the program was set in China, or at least a thoroughly Americanized version of a mythical 'China,' there is an exceptional amount of yellowface stereotyping

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<sup>279</sup> "Terry and the Pirates" in *Historical Dictionary of Old Time Radio*, Jon D. Swartz and Robert C. Reinehr, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1993), 254.

<sup>280</sup> Ron Goulart, *The Adventurous Decade* (New Rochelle: Arlington, 1975), 131 quoted in Gary Hoppenstand "Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of the Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment" in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. C.D. Geist and J. Nachbar (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1992), 284.

throughout the eleven years' worth of programming. While that is beyond the scope of this thesis,<sup>281</sup> I have instead decided to focus on its most enduring contribution to yellowface, where can better understand the complicated relationship between gender and race for Asians in America. The character of the Dragon Lady became one of the most enduring tropes for Asian women in America. In a reformulation of the virgin/whore dialect,<sup>282</sup> Oriental women were either portrayed as a submissive, chaste, sexually attractive, passive, and reserved China Doll/Lotus Blossom or as the Dragon Lady who is "untrustworthy, deceitful, conniving, and plotting" as she "may use sex or sexuality to get what she wants."<sup>283</sup> This creates a problematic representation of gender for women. The Dragon Lady is a "dark force, whose sexuality may be masculinized, whose heterosexuality may be cast as either incomplete, unusual in some way, or simply unattractive" and while both caricatures work to "configure women as sexually available," the China Doll/Lotus Blossom "image renders sexual availability passive and non-threatening" while the Dragon Lady "construction imagines sexual availability as a threat."<sup>284</sup> This important interplay between gender and race is essential to understanding yellowface representations of the Oriental on the airwaves.

Through its eleven years on the air, the Dragon Lady was voiced by the likes of Agnes Moorehead and Marion Sweet. The program brought to life the image of the

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<sup>281</sup> See Jason Crum, "'Out of the Glamorous, Mystic East' Techno-Orientalism in Early Twentieth Century U.S. Radio Broadcasting" in Roh, Davis S. et al, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015) for a good overview of *Terry and the Pirates*.

<sup>282</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 66. The virgin/whore dialect is a notion in which "women must either be chaste or perpetually sexually available" and "constructs women's sexuality through heterosexual masculine normative desire for control and possession."

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

Dragon Lady, changing popular images of Oriental women indefinitely. Even in children's programming, Oriental women operated as a "racialized exotic" other who was "represented as promiscuous and untrustworthy."<sup>285</sup> Throughout the series the Dragon Lady constantly eludes her enemies, manipulating her foes and demanding a sort of fearful respect from everyone. Significantly, she does not speak with an accent, a dramatic departure from other radio programs. Her voice is clear and confident, and the audience is readily reminded how "clever" and "tricky" she is, warning listeners not to be fooled for she is as "cold as a dog's nose and as calculating as a fox."<sup>286</sup> The intent of this decision highlights the idea that, perhaps, the Dragon Lady represented an Oriental who was too assimilated, her English too good and just as threatening as pidgin English.

She is selfish, cunning, double-crossing, and highly sexualized. Even in programming for children, the Dragon Lady works to seduce Pat, Terry's adult companion. She uses sex appeal to get her way and manipulate her enemies. She is a classic femme fatale character; while her intellect and beauty cannot be denied, she is a deadly force. By choosing to not have the Dragon Lady speak with pidgin English, an integral part of yellowface stereotyping, *Terry and the Pirates* had to rely on other aspects of yellowface to delegitimize the authority of Dragon Lady. This is done by capitalizing on Yellow Peril fears.

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<sup>285</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 132.

<sup>286</sup> *Terry and the Pirates*, "Dragon Lady Won't Stop the Attack," WGN Chicago, Written by Albert Barker and George Lowther, 21 January 1942.

The immense power of what radio scholars have called the “disembodied voice” becomes especially potent when that voice is female.<sup>287</sup> Through voice alone, the various women who portrayed the Dragon Lady brought to life Yellow Peril fears, feminizing them for the first time. In fact, the character of the Dragon Lady in *Terry and the Pirates* represents the only female voice in my entire analysis. Moving away from the super-feminine representations of Oriental women, almost always a fixture in the background in American popular culture, the Dragon Lady represents the opposite end of that spectrum, acting as a counter to feminized (and queered) Asian men. Because radio renders gender, like race, invisible, Golden Age programs that utilized yellowface caricatures had to work doubly hard to represent both. The Dragon Lady’s disembodied voice would have likely made listeners uncomfortable as the character is distinctly masculine. Her voice is low and powerful, oozing with disdain for Terry and his comrades. When you remove the visible component of gender, the “detached woman’s voice is much more potentially disturbing.”<sup>288</sup> This is complicated further when you add the dimension of race into the equation.

As we have seen before, Golden Age radio programming was distinctly impacted by World War II. Likewise, yellowface tropes reflected US foreign policy, meaning that the primary Chinese villain, the Dragon Lady, ultimately became the face of the Chinese resistance against the Japanese.<sup>289</sup> As popular sentiment soured against the Japanese after Pearl Harbor, the Chinese, as America’s allies, began to be more widely accepted as

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<sup>287</sup> Allison McCracken, “Scary Women and Scarred Men: *Suspense*, Gender Trouble, and Postwar Change, 1942-1950” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 189.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Terry and the Pirates*, “Pat Addresses Troops,” WGN Chicago, Written by Albert Barker and George Lowther, 28 April 1942.

“‘good guy’ Orientals.”<sup>290</sup> By 1945, when the War ended, the Dragon Lady returned to foiling the adventures of Terry and his friends. This is indicative of the enduring nature of the Dragon Lady: she is manipulative and does what is in the best interest of *her*. Radio reflected and sonically reproduced entrenched Yellow Peril fears, and by feminizing them sonically with the Dragon Lady, radio reflected popular fears regarding miscegenation. *Terry and the Pirates* portrayed the Dragon Lady, and by extension other Asian women, as subversive threat to white men and therefore a potential threat to the white American family structure.

For many listeners, *Terry and the Pirates* would have been their first insight into the orient. Unlike other adventure series, this program brought listeners to a mythical version of China, one that was firmly rooted in notions of Edward Said’s theory of domination, Orientalism.<sup>291</sup> *Terry and the Pirates* is just one small example of how white radio programmers, writers, actors, and listeners were able to establish authority over the orient by claiming knowledge of East Asian history, culture, and language. *Terry and the Pirates* is emblematic of a western desire to dominate, to have authority over another culture by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”<sup>292</sup> It would seem that popular culture and mass media is an

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<sup>290</sup> Gary Hoppenstand “Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of the Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment” in *The Popular Culture Reader*, ed. C.D. Geist and J. Nachbar (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1992), 284.

<sup>291</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). This theory of domination, which highlights how the western world claims authority over a subaltern group, has been extended into the Far East. This notion, called “Far Orientalism,” has been contested by scholars, some of whom feel that extending Orientalism out of the Middle East and into the Far East is inadequate. I, however, find it a particularly relevant framework for understanding yellowface on the radio and the continued subjugation of Asians in America, whose representations have been essentialized and oversimplified in popular culture.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



integral part in the establishment of authority over non-western culture, as Said aptly reminds us:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed.<sup>293</sup>

Radio played an integral role in establishing and maintaining a white national identity for Americans. Said reminds us that “authority does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist texts,” or in this instance Orientalist radio programming, rather what is important is an analysis “of the text’s surface, its exteriority to what it describes,” how the radio program “makes the Orient speak.”<sup>294</sup> These representations of the Oriental are the very essence of Orientalism and work to solidify social, political, cultural, and legal hegemony over non-western peoples. The battle between Terry and the Dragon Lady emphasize this notion, reducing their conflict to a racialized battle of West versus East, of white versus yellow.

### Superhero Programs:

Superhero radio serials were immensely popular across the country. Children and adults alike, eager to forget the realities of the Great Depression and World War II, turned to the radio to provide comfort and escapism. Superhero programming on the radio often reflected a dissatisfaction with the government, offering alternative methods for law enforcement that circumvented a corrupt government and an inept police force. Alexander Russo argues that a “central organizing feature” of the program *The Green*

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<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

*Hornet*, for example, was its “profound lack of faith in civic and governmental institutions.”<sup>295</sup> Superhero serials allow contemporary listeners to hear how “social debates around the state’s authority were being enacted in popular culture.”<sup>296</sup> Superhero radio programs that adopted yellowface tropes were particularly successful in this effort. They could function to criticize the government, express discontent with corruption, provide escapism from the socioeconomic realities of the day, and reproduce and maintain a white national identity. Superhero programs utilized yellowface tropes in manifold ways: as villains in the vein of Fu Manchu, as the embodiment of the Yellow Peril fear of contamination in both public and private spheres, or as sidekicks to white heroes, where their race is inextricably linked to mystical powers. Because of the multidimensional nature of yellowface stereotypes, where interplayed notions of a “good” Oriental and a “bad” Oriental converge, make them especially useful for the superhero genre.

Two popular Golden Age superhero serials were *The Shadow*, on the air from 1937 to 1954, and *The Green Hornet*, on the air from 1935 to 1952. Yellowface tropes were embedded in each of these series, integral to the storyline. Jason Loviglio’s examination of *The Shadow* demonstrates how “the program’s conflation of fears of foreigners, sexual seduction, mass culture, and the public sphere” were coupled with “the Shadow’s verbal and technical powers of mind control, surveillance, and persuasion” that

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<sup>295</sup> Alexander Russo, “A Dark(end) Figure on the Airwaves: Race, Nation, and *The Green Hornet*” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. by Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 261. As will be demonstrated, this assertion can be extended to many other popular superhero serials during the Golden Age.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

“simultaneously mirror[ed] and counteract[ed] the threats posed by alien forces.”<sup>297</sup>

Throughout the series, Oriental figures from the East used their ubiquitous mystical powers for evil, contributing to the idea of a Yellow Peril or the “criminally dangerous interloper.”<sup>298</sup> *The Green Hornet* echoed many of the same sentiments as *The Shadow*, including, but not limited to, damaging notions of Orientalism and yellowface. Loviglio does highlight a difference between the two, noting that while *The Green Hornet* “concerned itself primarily with civic corruption and the failure of local public institutions,” *The Shadow* “constantly linked such problems to insidious foreign threats.”<sup>299</sup> Furthermore, *The Shadow* was “obsessed with the threat of alien contamination of the public sphere” while public space in *The Green Hornet* “is already so thoroughly contaminated that one version of the Oriental ‘other’ must be brought into the private domestic space in order to fight it.”<sup>300</sup>

In his examination of *The Green Hornet*, Russo links the “centrality of culturally constructed racial fantasies to radio’s engagement” with the various social anxieties that plagued the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>301</sup> Kato, one of the most enduring examples of sonic yellowface, was the Green Hornet’s faithful and all-knowing Japanese sidekick and domestic servant. Kato functions as a kind of “cultural shorthand,” fitting into the “pattern of Asian characters depicted as houseboys and gardeners,” a nonthreatening character that audiences could digest.<sup>302</sup> Listeners could define themselves in opposition

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<sup>297</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 108.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-122.

<sup>300</sup> Russo, 273.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

to Kato, whose broken English, mystical powers, and inscrutable personality worked to emphasize his otherness. His mystical powers very clearly embody notions of Orientalism – where exotic Oriental culture is simultaneously fetishized and feared by the western world. *The Green Hornet* frequently worked to oversimplify Asian culture, portraying Kato as a kind of all-knowing repository for Oriental information, regardless of the fact that he is Japanese. By racializing Kato as Asian, the radio program could explain his mystical powers, highlighting the idea of an unknowable, strange world vastly different from America. This further emphasizes the conception of Yellow Peril, although a considerably less evil form. Asian characters like Kato represent the real-life fear of the subversive and feminized Oriental, quick to circumvent American cultural norms and laws – unassimilable to the fullest extent. Kato, it seems, operates as a kind of domesticated Yellow Peril.<sup>303</sup> Because Kato serves the Green Hornet, his Yellow Peril threat is neutralized.

As we have already seen, who was identified as a “good” Oriental and a “bad” Oriental largely depended on US foreign policy. In 1941, at the onset of World War II, scriptwriters of *The Green Hornet* suddenly transformed Kato from Japanese into a Filipino. Kato’s Asian identity was central to the program, but because of his connections with the heroic Green Hornet, it necessitated that he remained “good.” Russo notes that the “ease with which the show’s producers felt they could and should ascribe a new ethnic identity to one of the show’s main characters raises a variety of questions about how radio represents race in an imagined community.”<sup>304</sup> Ultimately, this speaks to the fluidity of yellowface stereotyping on the airwaves and the important conception of an

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<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

“undifferentiated Orientalness.”<sup>305</sup> Kato’s Asian identity was central to *The Green Hornet*’s storyline, serving as a “solution to cultural anxieties” by “invoking an Orientalist fantasy, first of a domesticated Yellow Peril, later an Asian ‘like us’ who fights the Japanese.”<sup>306</sup> More importantly, Russo argues, is the “ways in which the same general modes of racial signification could operate to fill a variety of ideological roles,” where:

their malleability allowed the show to use race as a flexible tool that adjusted to changing situations. While this functioned to shore up notions that ‘our’ national community is stable, well defined, and natural while ‘they’ are constantly changing, slippery, and unreliable, it also demonstrates how notions of race and identity, far from being natural and static, are culturally determined and linked to a specific social context.<sup>307</sup>

Kato embodied the interchangeability of yellowface stereotypes and works as an additional example of how Asians were represented across cultural, racial, national, and ethnic lines in a kind of homogenous group constructed as either “good” or “bad.”

### The Oriental as Alien:

Another popular American radio program was the serial *The Amazing Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*. Adapted from a comic book by the same name, *Flash Gordon* was on the air from 1935 to 1940. It followed the adventures of Flash Gordon and his comrades Dr. Hans Zarkov and Dale Arden. In the first episode, “On The Planet Mongo,” Flash Gordon and Dale are hurriedly ushered into a spaceship by Dr. Zarkov. They are headed to the planet Mongo to save Earth, but it is there that

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

they encounter Ming the Merciless, “Emperor of Mongo and Supreme Ruler of the Universe.”<sup>308</sup> Over the course of the episode, Ming decides he will marry Dale. She objects saying “never! I don’t love you!”<sup>309</sup> He reminds her that he has “no human traits. No love, no mercy, no kindness. Whether you love me or not makes no difference. You shall become my wife.”<sup>310</sup> It should be noted that Ming is not associated with any specific race or ethnicity; he is a literal alien. However, this does not stop him from speaking with a thick Asian accent. Like Fu Manchu, Ming the Merciless is hyper-sexualized and aggressive.

In the next episode, “Befriends Lion Men and Stops a Wedding,” Flash develops a plan to save Dale from her impending marriage.<sup>311</sup> On this journey, Flash encounters armored plated dragons and dangerous “yellow dogs.”<sup>312</sup> The wedding procession continues and we are introduced to Zogi, Ming’s high priest who speaks in soft, but broken, English. The wedding is interrupted and listeners hear how truly terrible Ming the Merciless really is as he sends Flash to his torture pit. Despite Ming’s thick accent, he speaks with impeccable grammar and without any additional “ee” sounds. Ming’s voice is powerful, domineering, and forceful.

Ming certainly embodies Yellow Peril, but in a way that is wholly unique. He is, quite literally, an alien. His planet Mongo is poised to destroy Earth and all of its inhabitants, a powerful metaphor for how many Americans viewed Asia. Ming is Yellow

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<sup>308</sup> *The Amazing Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*, “On The Planet Mongo,” Mutual Broadcasting Network, 27 April 1935.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *The Amazing Interplanetary Adventures of Flash Gordon*, “Befriends Lion Men and Stops a Wedding,” Mutual Broadcasting Network, 4 May 1935.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

Peril, reimagined. He is not of Japanese descent nor is he a resident of Chinatown, he is not a student of philosophy or a detective or an evil scientist. Unlike other radio programs we have discussed, where the Oriental identity of a character is essential to the plotline, Ming's Asian identity is not directly relevant to the story. It is an interesting, and intentional, choice. The idea of Asians and Asian Americans as aliens harkens back to the mid-nineteenth century and the fears white Americans felt during the wave of Chinese immigration during the Gold Rush. Repeatedly, we have seen how "Asians in America, immigrant and native-born, have been made into a race of aliens" since the "representation of the Oriental constructs the alien as a racial category."<sup>313</sup> Lee continues, noting that this idea is "deeply imbedded in American ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality."<sup>314</sup>

*Flash Gordon* capitalized on yellowface tropes, utilizing them to mark Ming as alien, unassimilable, unchanging, and a distinct threat humanity. Even from a different planet, Yellow Peril was employed, reflecting just how deeply ingrained it was in American culture. Ming's thick accent would have allowed listeners to immediately understand his threat. While the term alien, in this instance, refers to a literal alien from outer space, Asians in America were legally and socially considered alien. As we have discussed, popular culture during the Golden Age played a significant role in defining race. The radio became a significant arena where the "struggle over who is or who can become a 'real American' [took] place and where the categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race [were] defined."<sup>315</sup> Radio programming reflected this

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<sup>313</sup> Robert G Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), xi.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

desire of white Americans to represent the Oriental as a kind of alien, working to mobilize national identity.

“The Dragon’s Teeth:”

Crime-fighting protagonists and superheroes frequently worked as foils to the imagined Asian American on the radio, effectively countering racial differences by embodying the ideals of American culture. Arguably, one of the most “American” of these radio programs was *The Adventures of Superman*, a hugely popular serial that played from 1940 to 1951 on the Mutual Radio Network.<sup>316</sup> Superman, as the announcer proclaims at the beginning of each program, was a “champion of the oppressed” and a “physical marvel extraordinary who has sworn to devote his existence on Earth to helping those in need.”<sup>317</sup> Superman was an All-American hero: he is brave, masculine, honest, strong, good. Given the fact that Superman is actually an alien from the planet Krypton, his ability to embody the all-American ideals becomes especially significant; Superman is the model of an assimilated immigrant. This idea, coupled with the fact that Superman is white, further emphasizes the idea that Asian Americans (and other groups defined as ‘nonwhite’) were unassimilable, inferior, and distinct aliens.

Superman represents everything that any American would aspire to be, embodying the pinnacle of what it meant to be an American male in the 1940s.

Superman, symbolically the quintessential white male American, stands in stark contrast

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<sup>316</sup> For more information about *The Adventures of Superman*, see John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 14-15 and Vincent Terrace, *Radio Programs, 1924-1982: A Catalog of More than 1800 Shows* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>317</sup> Vincent Terrace, *Radio Programs, 1924-1982: A Catalog of More than 1800 Shows* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), 16.



to representations of the “other.” In regards to the Oriental other, we see this most clearly in the ten-part series, airing in 1941, called “The Dragon’s Teeth,” where Superman must encounter a new, Oriental threat.<sup>318</sup> The story follows Clark Kent and his boss Perry White into Chinatown, where they have been mysteriously summoned by Chi Wan. Unsure of why they are there to meet with Wan, an enigmatic art collector, Clark asks why more information was not given over the telephone:

PERRY WHITE: Well, if you know Orientals Kent, they don’t say much over the telephone. It’s an instrument of the Devil and they don’t trust it.

CLARK KENT: Well but surely Dr. Wan doesn’t feel that way, wasn’t he educated here in the United States?

PERRY WHITE: Yes, but the Chinese have certain inborn superstitions that even education won’t eradicate. Once an Oriental, always an Oriental.<sup>319</sup>

The first two minutes of the program, set in seedy Chinatown, highlight basic representations of what it meant to be Asian American in the 1940s via yellowface stereotypes. As an essentialized other, Chi Wan is unassimilable. His neighborhood is full of mystery, it is described as dark and dangerous – with evil lurking in every shadow. A knife is thrown as Clark and Perry as they head into Chi Wan’s apartment, the “yellow devil” darting away before they could catch him.<sup>320</sup> Chinatown is an important symbol of American segregation, a literal representation of the sonic color line. Even though Superman’s city (Metropolis) is fictional, writers found it necessary to position Chi Wan as a resident of the dark, dangerous, and mysterious Chinatown. The term Chinatown also demonstrates the collapsing of differences between different Asian ethnicities, lumping all Oriental figures into a category of representation that is easily called upon.

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<sup>318</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0157-0166. Written by B.P Freeman and Jack Johnstone, Mutual Broadcasting, 10 February 1941–3 March 1941.

<sup>319</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0157. Written by B.P Freeman and Jack Johnstone, Mutual Broadcasting, 10 February 1941.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*

We then meet Chi Wan who, despite his education in the United States, speaks with a very limited understanding of English and a thick accent. He is polite, calling Perry and Clark his “honored friends.”<sup>321</sup> He is philosophical, quoting pithy Chinese wisdom passed down in his family, such as: “it is only a fool who hurries to the grave.”<sup>322</sup> As we have seen, the interspersed “Eastern wisdom” in this episode was not uncommon in Orientalist representations of Asian Americans on the radio.<sup>323</sup> Chi Wan represents another example of an early model minority stereotype. Like Charlie Chan, Chi Wan is soft-spoken and passive, and still gifted with a mystical energy. Chi Wan knows he is going to die “before the next sun rises,” so he is eager to get help from the two reporters. He speaks softly, as “it is said that even sometimes the walls have ears,” telling the story of a mysterious 3,000-year-old goat-skin manuscript he uncovered in a temple during his travels in Western China.<sup>324</sup> This faded manuscript tells the secret of everlasting life: the ten teeth of the “sacred green dragon,” made of pure jade and bearing a Chinese character denoting a rare herb.<sup>325</sup> When the ingredients are combined, the powder frees the body of all disease. Chi Wan has collected nine of the ten teeth – the tenth in the hands of the corrupt jeweler Walter Huffman.

Unfortunately, Chi Wan has been unable to acquire said tooth from Huffman because his former employee, Hu Ling, revealed the secrets of the mysterious dragon’s teeth. Since then, Wan feels his life has been threatened by Huffman and Hu Ling. Chi Wan has enlisted Clark and Perry to keep his nine teeth safe, feeling certain that harm

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<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> Russo, 257.

<sup>324</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0157.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

would not come their way because Huffman would not “risk killing a white man.”<sup>326</sup>

Wan then offers the two men tea, “a delicate, aromatic blend” he had just received that morning.<sup>327</sup> He calls his servant, speaking a made-up language of which listeners must have assumed to be Chinese. While Wan is in the other room, Clark and Perry have a conversation about the teeth with Perry insisting that it is just “witchcraft.”<sup>328</sup> Perry begins drinking the tea, exclaiming “leave it to the Chinese to dish up a good cup of tea.”<sup>329</sup> Soon after, he clutches his throat – the tea had been poisoned. The episode ends with the announcer speculating what will happen next in this “strange Oriental drama.”

In this first of the ten-part series, listeners are bombarded with Oriental imagery. Chinatown is painted as dark, mysterious, and dangerous. Full of shadows and “wraith-like figures,” the narrator describes dimly lit shops “piled high with bits of jade, lacquered boxes, and all manner of strange curios from a land beyond the seas.”<sup>330</sup> The very fact that the story is set in Chinatown reminds listeners that, for all intents and purposes, the story does not take place in white America. This highlights the unassimilable and perpetually foreign nature of the Oriental. Hu Ling is depicted as an evil, backstabbing Chinese man who has betrayed his fellow Chinese employer for money, while Chi Wan is painted as an effeminate, passive, superstitious man. He is not a serious character, but rather an exotic embodiment of how listeners would have perceived Asian Americans in the 1940s. In this instance, sonic yellowface is utilized to convey aspects of the story that listeners, familiar with various stereotypes, would have

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<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

understood aurally and without visual cues. As the story continues, we encounter several more instances of yellowface. For instance, Jimmy Olsen (a cub reporter for *The Daily Planet*) begins episode two with this joke: “Ms. Lane, did you ever hear this one? Confucius say, ‘he who sits on a tack will rise to great heights.’”<sup>331</sup>

Part Two of “The Dragon’s Teeth” follows Jimmy and reporter Lois Lane into Chinatown, on the trail of Clark and Perry. Jimmy and Lois, in search of Chi Wan’s apartment, ask a man standing on the side of the street for information:

LOIS LANE: Pardon me, but would you know where Dr. Chi Wan lives?

CHINESE MAN: *Speaks indistinguishable Chinese.*

LANE: What?

CHINESE MAN: *Continues speaking indistinguishable Chinese.*

JIMMY OLSEN: Oh, you don’t know how to ask him. Listen to this – please, you tellee me where finde place Wan livee... or somethin.

CHINESE MAN: *Continues speaking indistinguishable Chinese.*<sup>332</sup>

It should be noted that the indistinguishable Chinese is not actually Chinese, but a kind of nonsensical language meant to vaguely sound like Chinese.<sup>333</sup> This embodies the idea of a Yellow Peril and represents a genuine failure to engage seriously with another culture and language. On the other hand, Jimmy’s adoption of pidgin English, which he feels confident the Chinese man will understand, represents a surface level attempt at comedy. Although, a closer examination reveals a deeper implication: the lack of articles, the incorrect grammar, the additional “ee” sound at the end of words, and the faulty syntax put forth the idea of the Chinese of the unassimilable foreigner. He may learn English, but he can never be fluent and therefore can never be American.

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<sup>331</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0158. Written by B.P Freeman and Jack Johnstone, Mutual Broadcasting, 12 February 1941.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

The “subversive potential of radio was met with a new preoccupation of the *sounds of difference*”<sup>334</sup> given the fact that radio “endlessly [circulated] and [performed] structured representations of ethnicity, race, gender, and other concentrated sites of social and cultural norms” via “language, dialect, and carefully selected aural context.”<sup>335</sup> We see this continually in American radio melodramas and it becomes especially stark when contrasted with widespread notion of Superman as the ideal, All-American example of citizenry and masculinity. In Superman we have a fully assimilated alien, in Chi Wan (and the other various inhabitants of Chinatown), we have an alien who is unwilling and/or unable to assimilate to American culture – choosing instead to reside in Chinatown and devote his life to Chinese antiquities

The “strange Oriental drama” continues, as the pair eventually finds Chi Wan’s apartment, narrowly escaping death in the shadows of Chinatown, only to be offered the same poisoned tea.<sup>336</sup> Superman intervenes at just the right moment to save Lois and Jimmy. He questions Wan about the poison, who promises “on the honor of [his] ancestors” that he did not know about the dangerous tea. Superman promises that Clark Kent will return the next day to collect the teeth as he flies out of the window. Chi Wan watches in wonder: “it is miracle. My eyes have seen miracle.”<sup>337</sup> As the episode comes to an end, we discover that Chi Wan’s Chinese servant has betrayed him, accepting a handsome sum of money from Huffman in exchange for Wan’s life and the dragon teeth. Chi Wan served to represent the effeminate, philosophical Chinese stereotype, which

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<sup>334</sup> Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, 117.

<sup>335</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>336</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0158.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

counters the ideal of American (white) masculinity. His voice is soft, high-pitched, and almost feeble. He does not exude power or control, his voice is not loud and Wan is continually interrupted by the men around him. Despite his education, Wan is limited by his race. He cannot speak proper English, and can therefore never be a true citizen of America. He cannot escape his inherent foreignness; it keeps him in a permanent state of ignorance. Again and again, we see the significance of an “imagined national community, bounded by important hierarchies, exclusions, and fears, and spoken in the accents of a new American form of speech that was both authoritative and intimate, broadly accessible and yet highly useful for marking and policing multiple forms of social difference.”<sup>338</sup>

With the death of Chi Wan, his character is replaced by another Asian caricature, Wan’s former employee Hu Ling, described as the “sallow-skinned Oriental.”<sup>339</sup> Hu Ling is a much more malevolent force than Wan, eager to betray his friend and employer in exchange for riches. Unlike other low, hyper-masculine voices of villains we have discussed thus far, the most obvious being Fu Manchu, Hu Ling’s voice is loud and shrill. He cannot maintain any amount of composure and his as things begin to escalate, his voice becomes crazed. In fact, when he and Lois Lane end up stranded in a dust storm, he is described by the narrator as a “half crazed Chinese.”<sup>340</sup> He begins to fight Lois, calling her a “devil woman” and invoking his ancestors to save him, to “take away from me, take from me these million demons that bite and sting my face, blind my eyes, choke my

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<sup>338</sup> Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*, 121. An extension of Loviglio’s concept, which he applies to *The Shadow* specifically, to include *The Adventures of Superman* as well as a more general application to American crime/detective radio melodramas of the era.

<sup>339</sup> *The Adventures of Superman*, “The Dragon’s Teeth” 0166. Written by B.P Freeman and Jack Johnstone, Mutual Broadcasting, 03 March 1941.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*

throat...’’<sup>341</sup> He is clearly delirious. Lois decides to try to help Hu Ling, attempting to calm him to calm by telling him that his ancestors sent her. He does not fall for it; he exclaims “who you are? No, no you are evil spirit. You are devil woman.”<sup>342</sup>

The episode continues as Hu Ling begins to laugh maniacally, “you you think to trick Hu Ling going with you. Listen, ’round us screams voice thousand demons, you hear?”<sup>343</sup> He hears the intense wind, thinking that Lois, a devil woman, has brought the demons to them. Hu Ling then ominously says the following: “Hu Ling fight evil spirit” while Lois screams in the background.<sup>344</sup> Superman arrives just as Hu Ling pulls out a knife to murder Lois Lane, knocking Hu Ling out. Yet again, we see an Asian American character who does not have a grasp of the English language and is wracked with superstitions. While Chi Wan represented a more effeminate version of an Oriental male, Hu Ling was evil, conniving, and murderous. He is the embodiment of Yellow Peril, loyal to no one and a threat to all. Like the dichotomy between Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, Hu Ling and Chi Wan embody the Yellow Peril and the model minority myth respectively. As we have discussed, these are not two completely distinct yellowface tropes, but are two sides of the same coin. The nature of both Chi Wan and Hu Ling contrast nicely with Superman, the epitome of American national identity during Golden Age radio. While each character represented a different form of yellowface, Chi Wan a meek, model minority and Hu Ling an evil, malevolent villain characterized by the Yellow Peril, together the full spectrum of yellowface is achieved. Superman worked to emphasize the ideal American level of masculinity, easily residing in the middle of the

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<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

spectrum of masculinity. These stereotypes, conveyed sonically, reinforce notions of inferiority while championing the white, male, American cultural hegemony that Superman embodies. The effectiveness of Golden Age superhero serials to convey monolithic cultural and societal norms is significant.

### Conclusion:

The complicated position of Asians and Asian Americans, who were simultaneously feared and respected, cunning and ignorant, spiritual and corrupt, or submissive and sexualized, had implications for conceptions of citizenship in America. Whiteness was a precursor to this citizenship, and because the sonic realm of radio eliminated visual indicators of race, programs had to utilize sonic elements, like pidgin English, to establish the alien nature of Asian and Asian Americans. It is critical to understand how the radio, and other mass media, worked to reflect and reconstruct the image of the Oriental, reworking “particular kinds of racial and colonial relationships that have been handed down for many generations.”<sup>345</sup> Lee argues that yellowface images are so pervasive that the “images that constitute the Oriental at any given moment are frequently contradictory, often to the point of appearing mutually exclusive, and sometimes mutable, they are stubbornly resistant to eradication.”<sup>346</sup> Conflicting notions within the stereotypes themselves work to delegitimize the position of Asians in America.

The limited representations of Asians and Asian Americans on the radio were “problematic, nudging dominant society toward particular controlling images,” like the

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<sup>345</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 175.

<sup>346</sup> Lee, xi.



Dragon Lady stereotype or the model minority trope.<sup>347</sup> Yellowface tropes in children's programming had special implications in that when we view, or hear Asians and Asian Americans "through the same tired stereotypes and representations" these "particular views become part of the archive of representations available for use," working to "become the staging ground for possible interaction."<sup>348</sup> Adventure serials and superhero programs worked to perpetuate and disseminate feelings that were already present throughout the country – real world anxieties like a changing familial structure, a desire for racial segregation, or a perceived loss in masculinity.

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<sup>347</sup> Ono and Pham, 173.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

## CONCLUSION

The Golden Age of radio, from the 1920s to the 1950s, represents a particularly insecure time in American history. Yellowface on the radio allowed performers to embody conceptions of Oriental otherness, producing sonic caricatures that reinforced notions of inferiority while simultaneously fortifying a white national identity. Radio programming that capitalized on this kind of sonic intolerance was especially popular, allowing for the construction of an “imagined community” as a “structure in tension, significant for both what it includes and what it excludes” wherein we can understand that the creation of a national voice refers “not to one uncontested discourse, but to the one that dominates out of the many competing, often conflicting, voices that make up the whole of broadcast experience.”<sup>349</sup> Because radio grew out of a specific set of social conditions, wherein the “crisis in national identity” was coupled with various “shifts in relations of power and social distinctions, particularly around race, gender and ethnicity,”<sup>350</sup> it had a unique capacity to sonically reinforce cultural hegemony and power.

The very presence of Asian and Asian Americans in the United States constituted a threat to the foundations of America. By redefining and reinforcing the

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<sup>349</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvii.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

creation of an Oriental Other, popular culture played a significant role in the cultural construction of Asians in America. This particular brand of xenophobia and racism expressed itself via oversimplified stereotypes of a conglomerate yellow enemy. Ultimately, the very visible stereotypes that were represented originally in the theatre to a limited audience became audibly accessible to mainstream America via the radio. Yellowface representations of the Oriental allowed white performers and listeners to express and explore anxieties in their own lives. By observing yellowface in a distinctly American tradition of radio, we can better understand how listeners understood themselves in the context of American Orientalism.

The intent is unmistakable as listeners imbibed and inscribed these stereotypes, creating an essential other that shored up their own identity. In this instance, the relationship between sound and the idea of citizenship is crucial, especially in contemporary debates regarding immigration. The soundscape of the United States, with many different regional dialects, and accents from abroad, is varied. Immigrants from all over the world have settled in America, and the perceptions of these different groups certainly depends largely on cultural representations. More often than not, this construction of the United States as a nation of immigrants is audible, rather than visual. Within the context of this thesis, listening becomes essential to this process. The construction of the immigrant, and their relationship within American citizenship, hinges a good deal on sonic interpretation, where some accents seem preferable to others. Because the use pidgin English has remained largely a fixed feature of Asian representation in American culture, we can hear how even into the twentieth century Asians in America are portrayed as unassimilable.

Aural yellowface worked to reproduce and reinforce a distinct, white American national identity. In the 1920s and 1930s, it largely functioned to exclude the Chinese from any participation in social, political, economic, and cultural developments of an increasingly nativist America. In 1941, the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor brought Yellow Peril fears into a glaring national security issue, and yellowface tropes worked to vilify the Japanese. By the 1950s, we see a changing course for yellowface on the radio. The enemy of America was red, and it was increasingly spreading across the globe. At this point, the Japanese had returned to being an American ally while the Chinese were once again the enemy, as they were associated with communism. Yet again, the “good” Oriental and the “bad” Oriental had been switched in American popular culture. Because of the association of the Chinese with communism, Cold War rhetoric was especially useful in remobilizing Yellow Peril.

At the end of a 1951 *Mr. I.A. Moto* episode “The Smoke Screen,” Mr. Moto is has poignant and honest conversation about his identity with a fellow police officer.<sup>351</sup> The policeman asks Mr. Moto if he had ever made a mistake:

MOTO: Sometimes. Sometimes I wince and lash out inside when some people call me a “dirty Jap.” I was born in San Francisco. I am as American as you are  
COP: Oh but surely you know that these people are, well they’re –  
MOTO: That is true, they are ignorant and their number is decreasing  
COP: Yes, I think we’re growing up. Slowly maybe, but growing  
MOTO: I hope it is not too slowly. I hope we achieve maturity before it is too late. That is one way everybody can fight communism, simply by growing up and out of prejudice. It is a battle in which every one of us can be a solidier.

It should be noted that directly after this conversation, the Caucasian voice actor James Monks as Mr. Moto previews next week’s episode by first quoting an ancient proverb,

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<sup>351</sup> *Mr. I.A. Moto*, “The Smoke Screen,” Written and Directed by Harry W. Junkin, NBC Network, 3 June 1951.

“man who lives a falsehood, must each day die a little” and then by saying “and now, may sleep fall upon your eyes as softly as poppy petals on a platted pool, may your soul be blessed with repose, your dreams with enchantment.” The very fact that Mr. Moto was played by a white actor, not matter how progressive his dialogue may have been, represents how far America still needed to go.

It is my hope that this thesis opens up further exploration into the relationship between Oriental stereotyping and actual Asian and Asian Americans in the United States. While the preservation of more localized Asian radio programming is limited by the archive, I have also been limited in my understanding of different Asian languages. By opening up a critical conversation regarding Golden Age programming, future scholars can investigate Asian listener reactions through creative inquiry with new kinds of sources, including oral histories, memoirs, and radio columns in local and national newspapers. By looking at how Asian American listeners may have interpreted, imbibed, or rejected yellowface tropes on the radio, we can more fully appreciate how important yellowface was in the creation of both a white national identity and Asian American national identities. Another fruitful path for future research is the relationship between yellowface caricatures, which work to simultaneously represent Asians as a model minority and the Yellow Peril, and representations of Jews in popular culture. Anti-Semitic stereotyping, like yellowface, relied on this kind of dual stereotyping. The projection of Anti-Semitic stereotypes, which faded on the airwaves during the Golden Age, onto Oriental caricatures is significant, and while it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate, future scholars may find this a particularly interesting avenue for exploration.

Critical attention to the formation and perpetuation of yellowface via Golden Age radio programs, even nearly a century later, is crucial for “dismantling systems of domination.”<sup>352</sup> Drawing attention to and providing a deeper analysis of the implications of yellowface in regards to notions of citizenship and nationality for both white and Asian Americans is vital. Future scholars may find that there is interesting work to be done by juxtaposing blackface and yellowface on the radio. By focusing on how these two dual minority representations work together and in opposition of one another, we can better understand the construction of whiteness as an “American” identity. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see how yellowface representations of the Oriental on Golden Age radio have remained largely unchanged in new media in the twenty-first century.<sup>353</sup> Perhaps though, through research like mine which critically studies Oriental caricatures in American popular culture, we can finally see the dismantling of yellowface representations. By seeking to understand the connections between sound, race, gender, and nationality, we can better understand how Golden Age radio reproduced those connections on the airwaves, reflecting popular sentiment regarding Asians and Asian Americans. Kent Ono and Vincent Pham note that “through critique, the possibilities for change become imaginable.”<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, referenced in Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>353</sup> See Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) for a helpful overview of how historical yellowface links with contemporary media.

<sup>354</sup> Ono and Pham, 44.

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